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P R E S S R E L E A S E

New Bedford Fishing Industry Helping to Protect the Environment New Program Reduces Oil Spill Threat in New Bedford Harbor

New Bedford, Massachusetts- New Bedford, Fairhaven and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) are working together with the fishing industry and other commercial vessel operators to prevent oil spills and keep New Bedford Harbor, home of America's No. 1 Fishing Port, clean through the "Clean Bilge Program."

New Bedford Harbor is home to more than 400 fishing vessels that harvest the sea and many seafood processing plants and other businesses that support the fishing industry are also located in New Bedford and Fairhaven. The Port of New Bedford is an important economic engine for New Bedford, Fairhaven and the region. With so much commercial activity in New Bedford Harbor (including 400 fishing vessels, 4,400 jobs, seafood landings valued at \$329 million, as well as more than 30 processors and distributors) small oil spills became a frequent occurrence, and have threatened collaborative efforts to clean and improve water quality in the harbor.

According to recent U.S. Coast Guard data, there has been at least one recorded small oil spill in New Bedford Harbor each month since 2010 and contaminated bilge water is considered the most likely source of these spills. The vast majority of these spills are small, but even a single cup of oil has the potential to contaminate a football field-sized area.

However, an innovative pilot program to prevent oil spills is changing the tide and improving the health of the New Bedford Harbor. Funded by MassDEP and operated by the New Bedford Harbor Development Commission (HDC), Clean Bilge works directly with commercial fishing vessel operators and the operators of other commercial vessels to prevent oil spills.



Since Clean Bilge began in October of 2015, more than 120 vessels have signed up to participate, 48 vessels have had their bilge pumped and 14,117 gallons of oily bilge water was recovered and properly disposed of and kept out of New Bedford Harbor.

An agent of the City’s Harbor Development Commission connects directly with vessel owners on both the New Bedford and Fairhaven sides of the harbor and provides advice on how to avoid oil leaks, refuel safely and maintain a clean bilge. In addition to helpful guidance, vessel owners can receive bilge pumping – the removal of unwanted water that can become contaminated with oil and collects in the lowest part of all vessels.

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“The Port of New Bedford is one of Greater New Bedford’s most important economic assets and we are working on many fronts to ensure that New Bedford Harbor continues to be a strong asset for our region and protecting its environmental health is a critical component of our efforts. I am encouraged at the number of vessels that have signed up for the program thus far and thank the participating vessels for being good stewards of the environment,” said Mayor Jon Mitchell.

“Following the Buzzards Day oil spill, MassDEP has helped New Bedford and coastal communities respond to oil spills with funding for new cleanup equipment and response plans that protect sensitive resources,” said MassDEP Deputy Commissioner Gary Moran. “Now, with the new clean bilge pilot program, we are reaching out directly to vessel owners with a preventative measure that aims to stop spills before they happen.”

“The persistent “mystery” oil spill problem has no place in the New Bedford Harbor we are all working so hard to restore every day. The Buzzards Bay Coalition is excited to be a partner in this voluntary effort to improve bilge oil management. It has been wonderful to see the positive response and commitment from fishing vessel owners to cleaning up the Harbor,” said Mark Rasmussen, President, Buzzards Bay Coalition

More than 120 commercial vessels have signed up to participate in the program and each receives a complimentary inspection and specific recommendations on preventing oil spills. Rodney Avila, a former commercial fisherman from New Bedford was hired by the HDC to lead the program. Port Director, Edward Anthes-Washburn said, “By working with fishermen we have prevented countless oil spills and are maintaining a cleaner harbor. I think the education component of this program has been critical to the success we’ve had thus far.”

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