Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs

Department of Environmental Protection
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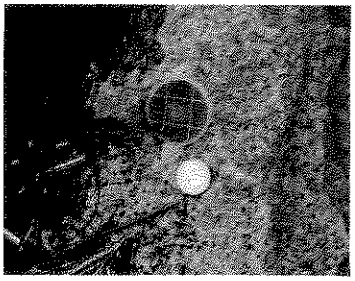
03-17-11 Update on Plastic Disks in the Merrimack River and Found Washing Up Along the Coast of Massachusetts and New Hampshire

Plastic Mesh Disks Tested by MassDEP Show Low or No Levels of Bacteria

As reported earlier this week in various news outlets, small white thin circular mesh disks that are approximately two inches in diameter were released into the Merrimack River from the Hooksett, NH Wastewater Treatment Facility on March 6, 2011 following heavy rainstorms. Hooksett officials say the affected wastewater treatment tank held over 39 million disks and that 10 to 20 percent of the disks may have been released to the Merrimack River or an estimated four million to eight million disks.

Disks are showing up all along the Merrimack River, on New Hampshire beaches and on Massachusetts beaches from Salisbury around the Rockport /Gloucester peninsula and into Beverly as of 3/17/11. There is a possibility that the disks may continue to migrate and show up on your city or town beaches, at marinas and boat ramps or in your rivers, marshes, creeks, etc.

Disks on beaches in Newburyport



Testing of the disks by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) show some bacteria, but at ranges that do not exceed levels of concern. Although the low levels of bacteria are typical of those present in any form of litter or debris that washes up on beaches, out of an abundance of caution, MassDEP and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) advise that the public should treat the disks like any litter and avoid contact with the disks unless taking proper precautions. If picking up or handling the disks, the public should wear protective plastic gloves and thoroughly wash their hands, and make sure not to put their fingers in their mouth, eat, drink or touch their eyes before

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MassDEP Website: www.mass.gov/dep

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washing their hands. Also, the public should be advised to not allow children to play with the disks, and to not allow pets such as dogs and cats to come in contact with the disks.

If municipal employees, volunteers of individuals wish to do some beach cleanup and there are disks present, normal "beach cleanup guidelines" should be followed. Gloves (such as latex gloves) should be worn to pick up any disks. No additional equipment or clothing is required. Disks and gloves should be bagged and disposed of in the trash for regular disposal as solid waste. When a person is done, hand gels may be used, but hand washing with soap and water for a minimum of 20 seconds is preferred. Clothing worn during cleanup work should be laundered as normal.

Due to high water during this time of year, MassDEP strongly discourages volunteers or municipal employees from attempting to clean up disks from along the banks of the Merrimack River. Professional contractors are currently conducting cleanups in those areas.

The Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) and its agencies, along with emergency management representatives from impacted coastal and Merrimack River communities, are coordinating disk cleanup efforts and working with the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services on overall response. Additional updates will be provided to you by MEMA and EEA as soon as possible. If you wish to contact Hooksett directly, please contact the Emergency Management Director Dan Pike at 603-315-5216 or at DPike@Hooksett.org

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MassDEP is responsible for ensuring clean air and water, safe management and recycling of solid and hazardous wastes, timely cleanup of hazardous waste sites and spills, and the preservation of wetlands and coastal resources