



# Charles River rating improves

**Officials hope device will make it swimable**

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BOSTON -- The Charles River hasn't been this clean in years, but don't jump in just yet.

Yesterday, the Environmental Protection Agency issued its fifth annual report card on the 80-mile river's cleanliness, awarding it a "B" for 1999. The grade is far better than the "D" the river got five years ago. Still, officials said 65 percent of samples taken from the Charles last year failed to meet state standards for safe swimming.



"There's still a ways to go," said Mindy Lubber, the regional administrator of the EPA's New England office. "And the grade from 'B' to 'A' is going to be harder, perhaps, than getting from 'D' to 'B.'"

Still, the EPA is sticking to its goal of restoring the Charles to safe swimming and fishing conditions by 2005, Lubber said. Toward that goal, officials will test a new product this summer that could soon allow parts of the river to be safe for swimming.

Called the Gunderboom, the device is a curtain-like barrier that will hang underwater and filter out suspended solids and bacteria. The curtain will be arced around Magazine Beach in Boston, and the enclosed water will then be replaced once with filtered water. Samples will then be drawn from the water inside the curtain over several days to determine its cleanliness.

Similar booms have been used successfully at Sea Cliff Beach on New York's Long Island and Mamaroneck Beach in Westchester County in New York.

If all goes well, some residents hope swimming at the once-popular spot near Boston University won't be far behind. Bea Harvey, of Cambridge, recalls swimming there with her family in the 1930s.

"It was very crowded and a big treat for us to spend the day there swimming and picnicking," Harvey said.

Over the years, the Charles River has become polluted from storm water run-off and sewage discharge, often from illegal sewer connections.

Officials yesterday credited Massachusetts Water Resources Authority personnel and others with significantly improving the Charles during the last five years by checking storm drains and removing illegal sewer pipes. About 400 illegal sewer connections remain along the river, however, said Arleen O'Donnell, assistant commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection.

Other state rivers, including the Mystic River, are also being cleaned. But environmentalists acknowledge that they have focused a great deal of energy on the Charles because its proximity to Boston and its historic significance.

"The Charles River is a world-class river in a world-class city and one that has hundreds of thousands of people lining its banks over the course of a year," Lubber said.

"The city would be richer for having a water way that is healthy and vibrant to the people who live alongside it."

Whether that can be accomplished by 2005 remains to be seen, but officials are optimistic.

"I think this effort has a tremendous amount of momentum," O'Donnell said. "There's a lot of committed individuals and every year there are more and more people that join in."