



ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Massachusetts' regional planning agencies play a pivotal role in managing and protecting regional environmental resources—addressing environmental issues that involve more than one community, providing technical assistance to local governments with environmental issues, and linking municipalities with the federal and state governments on environmental policies, programs, and regulations.

Regional Planning Agencies Take a Cooperative Approach

Because most environmental issues transcend the boundaries of a single community, Massachusetts' regional planning agencies are uniquely qualified to craft regional solutions to problems that are regional in scope. In fact, the fundamental feature of natural resources is that they transcend municipal boundaries. Watersheds, aquifers, and river basins, for instance, are routinely shared by two or more communities—and the impact on those resources in one community will likely be felt by its neighbors.

Clearly, regional cooperation and coordination are crucial for protecting Massachusetts' natural resources and, in turn, public health and safety. With their regional orientations and their oversight capacities, the RPAs make effective use of scarce state and federal assistance dollars and apply their technical expertise to critical environmental concerns, from solid waste district formation and septage management to open space protection and watershed management.

Regional Planning Agencies Help Local Governments

Under Massachusetts' system of home rule, local governments are frequently responsible for overseeing myriad environmental concerns—water supply protection, air and water quality, solid waste, septage management, lake management, land use and zoning, open space planning, river basin planning, and environmental impact analysis, to name a few. At the same time, many of these communities must rely upon part-time, unpaid community members for their operations and have little, if any, professional staff to address increasingly complex environmental issues and threats.

RPAs help planning boards, conservation commissions, water and sewer commissions, and boards of health carry out their mandates by providing direct technical assistance on a wide array of pressing environmental issues. RPAs perform a number of services under this rubric: researching and writing reports with recommendations for action, attending board meetings and making oral presentations, preparing and distributing practical “how-to” manuals for local officials, writing model bylaws, compiling and evaluating data, and conducting public education and information programs, among many others.

Regional Planning Agencies Help State Government

It is extremely difficult and costly for state agencies such as the Department of Environmental Protection and the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs to directly address the environmental concerns confronting 351 different communities across the commonwealth. The regional planning agencies are vehicles for helping state agencies implement state programs and policies in each region, and for coordinating the delivery of services throughout Massachusetts.

The state's regional planning agencies are in a unique position to provide a critical link between state programs and local communities. Because the RPAs have close ties with and important technical knowledge about the communities they serve, they can work effectively to further state goals and objectives at the local level for such issues as water quality, waste management, water supply, open space, and land use planning.

Regional Planning Agencies at Work: A Sampler of Environmental Quality Planning

The Cape Cod Commission developed the Pond and Lake Stewardship (PALS) project, which employs citizen volunteers to monitor, test, and protect the water quality of Cape Cod's more than 900 ponds and lakes.

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission developed the Interstate Coalition on Connecticut River Clean-Up and staffed the Connecticut River Clean-Up Committee to address the regional problem of combined sewer overflows and thereby achieve fishable, swimmable water quality in the lower Connecticut River.