

# Verizon overbilled Suffolk \$1.25M

BY RICK BRAND  
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Verizon overcharged Suffolk County on its phone bills \$1.25 million, largely for hundreds of extra miles of emergency 911 phone lines for which it should never have been charged, county Comptroller Joseph Sawicki said yesterday.

The county's outside consultants, said Sawicki, also expect to find another \$1 million in overcharges before their review is completed next year.

"With the county paying more than \$7.5 million in annual phone bills on 15,000 phone lines, we knew it was definitely worth investigating," said Sawicki. He declined to say whether the overcharges were intentional, but added, "It's funny that when errors like this are found it is never in favor of the customer, it is always in favor of the utility."

John Bonomo, Verizon spokesman, acknowledged the overcharges, but said the company tries to make bills "as accurate as possible." Although he noted that a large customer like Suffolk is "not a static account," there are "changes almost every day." Verizon, he said, has already credited Suffolk with \$600,000 in refunds as a result of the audit and is "currently reviewing the county account for verifica-

tion on other charges."

But Sawicki's top deputy, Christina Capobianco, said the county has already received credits for the full \$1.25 million.

In addition to recouping as much as six years of past overcharges, Sawicki said the audit will save the county about \$264,000 a year on future phone bills. County Executive Steve Levy praised the recoveries as "welcome news in these challenging financial times."

The ongoing audit, done by PhoneReview, found that Verizon was improperly charging the county for 415 miles of emergency 911 phone lines that are tied into Southold, Riverhead, East Hampton and Amityville.

In the biggest instance, Sawicki said the county was billed monthly for 48 miles of 911 phone lines hooked into the Southold Police, but the county should have only been billed for 48 quarter miles, or 12 miles — an overcharge of \$363,604.

Sawicki hired the Mineola-based firm last year under a contingency agreement in which PhoneReview gets 30 percent of whatever overcharges are found. The comptroller said the firm has completed its review of the police department, 911 system and the information technology office, but still has to review other county offices in Hauppauge and elsewhere.

## \$1M for flounder study

BY JENNIFER SMITH  
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Federal lawmakers have agreed to spend \$1 million next year for research on summer flounder, a key species for Long Island's recreational and commercial fishing industries.

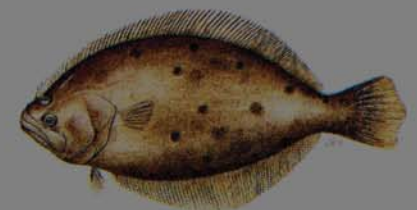
The money will help scientists study population dynamics and mortality of summer flounder, also known as fluke.

The goal is to improve the data that federal fisheries managers use to set annual catch limits. Industry backers hope higher fluke quotas will result.

Members of the New York and New Jersey delegations put the earmark in a \$1.1 trillion omnibus spending bill the Senate passed on Sunday. The money will go to a New Jersey nonprofit, the Partnership for mid-Atlantic Fisheries Science. It's composed of fishing industry groups and scientific advisers from Rutgers and Cornell universities.

"In order to protect our fishing industries and our fisheries, we have to make the best data available," Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand said in a statement. Fellow New York Democrats Sen. Charles Schumer and Rep. Tim Bishop, and Republican Rep. Peter King also requested the funding.

Summer flounder has been subject to strict catch limits after overfishing



Research could help raise catch limits for summer flounder, also called fluke.

caused the population to plummet in the 1980s. While stocks are now recovering, uncertainty about the estimates of fish populations has led to what some regard as overly conservative harvest quotas.

Among the uncertainties: how many fluke are killed by predators (as opposed to fishing); and the effect of different mortality rates among male and female fluke.

Research indicating that natural mortality was greater than thought helped convince regulators to increase the 2009 summer flounder quota by nearly 3 million pounds, said Emerson Hasbrouck, marine program director for Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.

"If the natural mortality increases, that means the stock is bigger than what you thought it was," Hasbrouck said. "If that population level is greater, you can now harvest more fish."

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