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Those Who Can't, Study

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Yet more pondering is proposed to figure out how to clean up the Chesapeake Bay.

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WHEN THE [Chesapeake Bay](#) Program started in 1983, the goal was to clean up that massive waterway by 2000. That deadline was blown. So the governors of the seven states on the 64,000-square-mile watershed and the federal government came up with a new deadline: 2010, which was pronounced almost impossible to reach late last year. Now, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), which oversees the restoration program, proposes to study how it can implement a plan based on pollution inputs into the bay. The deadline for completing the review: 2011. We'd put major money on this deadline being missed, too, were it not for the EPA being under court order to produce said plan.

That efforts to stop the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries from becoming pools of pollution are failing should hardly come as a surprise. The [Chesapeake Bay Foundation](#) gave its namesake a D. After years of progress, the [Potomac River](#) was given a D-plus for cleanliness by the Potomac Conservancy. The [University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science](#) gave the same grade to the [Patuxent River](#). And this month the South River Federation issued a score on the river's health: 34 out of 100. All of these waterways feed the bay.

The reasons for the problems are many. Overdevelopment along the watershed is the chief culprit. All those houses and roads and parking lots are transforming the natural filtering ecosystem into a waterslide for pollutants into the [Chesapeake](#) and its tributaries. And chemical and other agricultural runoff are adding nutrients to the water that feed oxygen-depleting algae blooms, which kill fish and other aquatic life. To minimize some of those effects, many jurisdictions are encouraging the use of "green" building techniques and have mandated infrastructure changes, such as upgrades of wastewater systems. Clearly, these improvements haven't been enough.

Under the EPA plan, the total maximum daily load (TMDL) of pollution in the bay and its tributaries would be the new measure of cleanliness and enforcement. The watershed would be broken up into sectors and regions, and a TMDL would be determined for each area. Once this was completed, there would be a public comment period. Offenders who did not comply with the practices designed to keep pollution under the maximum could face penalties enforceable under the Clean Water Act and other environmental laws and regulations.

The EPA wants to spend the next four years preparing this program. That's because the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia ruled in 1999 that if the 2010 deadline was not met, a regime based on TMDL would have to be completed by 2011. But Roy Hoagland of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation demanded in a letter to the EPA that the agency "move expeditiously" in developing the TMDL. He told us Thursday that because there have been studies and plenty of public comment on the fate of the Chesapeake watershed, there's no reason the pollution budget should take four years to complete. We agree. At some point, study has to give way to action.

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