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EDITORIALS

Backsliding in the Potomac

A report raises a red flag about the 'Nation's River.'

Sunday, December 2, 2007; Page B06

THE POTOMAC River isn't what it used to be. Thank goodness -- it's a lot cleaner. Yet it earned a D+ in a first-ever "State of the Nation's River" report from the Potomac Conservancy. The group warns that the river will revert to its filthy past if officials in towns and cities along its banks and abutting its tributaries don't change their development and agricultural practices.

Folks of a certain age will remember the days when the [Potomac](#) was a polluted pool of raw sewage and industrial chemicals that fed into the [Chesapeake Bay](#). [President Lyndon B. Johnson](#) called it a "national disgrace." The Clean Water Act of 1972 started the river's resurgence. But now, the Potomac Conservancy warns, "the health of the river has reached a plateau." Why? Explosive growth in the Potomac watershed has gobbled up land and removed natural barriers to pollutants and fast-moving runoff. Rain runoff from buildings raises water temperatures, not to mention bringing a flood of pollutants. So does runoff from vehicle-clogged roadways. The result has been high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus, fish kills that span greater distances and last longer and, eerily, the discovery of "intersex" fish,

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which show elements of both genders.

Because the sources of pollution today are so widespread, the cleanup task is more complicated than it was in the 1970s. But there are solutions. [Prince George's County](#) has led the way promoting low-impact development in construction, and other jurisdictions should follow. This includes "green" roofs and permeable pavements, which reduce the volume, slow the speed and lower the temperature of runoff, in addition to filtering it of pollutants. Green roofs have the added benefit of reducing carbon emissions by making buildings more energy-efficient by keeping them cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.

The Potomac Conservancy promises a checkup report every five years. That's plenty of time to move up from a D+, if local officials take low-impact development ideas seriously. They might sound quixotic, but their cumulative impact can be large.

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