

## **Group: Growth must be slowed to save Potomac**

### **Conservationists urge Va. to adopt low-impact development techniques**

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Runaway growth and development must be controlled to save the Potomac River and the open spaces needed to protect it, a conservation group said yesterday.

The Silver Spring, Md.-based Potomac River Conservancy urged Virginia and its neighbors to adopt low-impact development techniques to save forests and farmland in the region and improve the quality of water that washes from streets, rooftops and storm drains.

The conservancy gave the river a D+ in the review, which it said was designed to call attention to the Potomac and build support for low impact development measures.

The group said human population in the 383-mile-long river's watershed is expected to grow by 1 million people in the next 20 years to 6.25 million; it pointed to Prince William County, Va., and Frederick and Charles counties, Md., as growth hot spots in the rapidly developing Washington region.

"Runoff from development is the fastest-growing water-quality problem, and the solutions are not being implemented in many places," said H. Hedrick Belin, the conservancy's director.

Runoff sends fertilizers and animal waste into the river that fuel algae blooms and fish kills. The Potomac was pounded last summer by extensive algae blooms that killed fish and inhibited the growth of ecologically important underwater grasses. One bloom in Westmoreland County left 300,000 fish dead.

Belin discussed the group's first Potomac watershed assessment during a conference call yesterday.

He said the group is urging the Virginia General Assembly to pass forest conservation laws to require developers to leave adequate greenways along streams. The group is also encouraging the state Department of Conservation and Recreation to complete work on proposed statewide stormwater regulations that would improve water quality.

Spokesman Gary Waugh said the department is reviewing new regulations to strengthen standards. The proposal would also require all Virginia localities to either run their own stormwater management program or turn it over to state regulators.

He said the agency expects to publish the proposals in July and possibly have them ready following another year of review.

"Although we cannot do much to control the increase in population in the coming years, we can attempt to minimize the increase in impervious area by developing wisely and efficiently," the report says.

More pavement and more rooftops mean more rainwater is directly channeled into streams that become scoured, flushing increased loads of sediments, polluting nutrients and other contaminants into the river. At the same time, forests and farmland that previously soaked up rainfall are being cut to accommodate more roads, houses and other impervious surfaces.

A director of a federal-state agency that oversees Potomac River water quality said the conservancy's assessment of the river's health and the problems facing it was on target.

"In general, I would agree that nutrients and sediments are the pollution problem and population growth and development that goes along with it are the big challenges," said Carlton Haywood of the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin.

He said sewage upgrades that improved the river decades ago show that the Potomac will respond to protective measures. But, unlike years ago when the main pollution problems poured from sewage treatment pipes, the entire landscape in the rapidly growing region is leaking trouble into the river.

"Runoff is everywhere," he said. "It's not just a few municipalities or corporations responsible" as was the case with sewage-treatment plants.

Market forces could provide the long-term answer, said Chesapeake Bay Foundation President Will Baker, who joined the conference call.

He said developers are responding to consumer desires for parks and pathways that make communities more appealing. He said he met Monday with a developer who sought bay foundation advice to help plan redevelopment of large housing project in the Potomac's watershed.

"They see a very strong economic reason to green up the 5 to 600-acre parcel they're working on," Baker said. Contact Lawrence Latané III at (804) 333-3461 or [llatane@timesdispatch.com](mailto:llatane@timesdispatch.com).

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