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STATE OF THE NATION'S RIVER 2008

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D.C. area a "hard place to live" -

New report warns of fastest-growing pollution in Potomac River, as urban runoff threatens source of area's drinking water

Potomac Conservancy releases 2nd annual "State of the Nation's River" report, targeting pollution draining from city pavement, roofs, and lawns

Pollution from a hardened landscape has become the Potomac region's fastest-growing water quality problem, threatening the health of the waters from which 86 percent of the region's residents get their drinking water. Potomac Conservancy discusses the consequences of paving over our region in its second annual "State of the Nation's River" report, released today on a press conference call.

The group released a new survey in conjunction with the report, showing that only 38 percent of local residents can correctly identify one of the major threats to water quality and the health of the river system as "runoff from city streets and rooftops" – untreated hot, dirty stormwater that quickly pours off the area's pavement and runs off hard-packed lawns. On the other hand, 60 percent of people thought that about "industrial waste," which actually is a minor threat.

The public is acutely aware of one issue: 71 percent realize that during heavy rains, untreated sewage is sent directly into the rivers around Washington, D.C. They overwhelmingly consider this upsetting and unacceptable, but few know what should be done about it, the survey found. A professional polling company surveyed 176 people by phone and 24 in person from October 1-15, 2008, for Potomac Conservancy, identified to poll respondents as "a local non-profit group." See attached poll results for more detail.

Public knowledge of these issues will be critical to developing support for solutions, according to Hedrick Belin, President of Potomac Conservancy. "Although there is awareness of the runoff issue, our polling reveals that people don't appreciate all the problems it causes. At the same time, they

want to know what they and their local governments can do to prevent the degradation of our streams and the impairment of our drinking water supply.”

In the coming year, the Conservancy calls for the following actions:

- Virginia Governor Tim Kaine and the state’s Soil and Water Conservation Board should approve proposed new stormwater regulations.
- The next U.S. EPA Administrator and the states should require that all new or re-issued MS4 stormwater permits be at least as strong, and preferably stronger, than the new Montgomery County, Md., and Washington, D.C., permits.
- Grantmakers should fund training city and county workers and managers in the construction and engineering practices needed to protect the watershed through low-impact development.

More details are available on the attached Potomac Agenda.

In addition to the sources of pollution, the report also outlines critical steps to improve the Potomac’s water quality, including the use of “low-impact development” practices. Low-impact development provides practical solutions to curbing pollution from runoff that incorporate the natural water-absorbing capabilities of undeveloped land. Corrective actions including rain gardens, green roofs, and porous pavements are being implemented in communities nationwide, including the District of Columbia.

The health of the Potomac River also affects waterways and communities downstream, including the Chesapeake Bay. “If we have any hope of cleaning up our rivers and the Bay, we must tackle the fastest growing major source of pollution we face: stormwater run-off,” say Dr. Margaret Palmer, Director of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science’s Chesapeake Biological Laboratory. “Not only does it cause unprecedented flood flows in our waterways after rain storms but it causes spikes in temperatures in our small streams of up to 7°C that can last for hours, brings sediment that has high levels of pollutants into our waters, and carries many of the pesticides and fertilizers used on our lawns. All of this makes its way to the Chesapeake Bay. No wonder we are having a hard time restoring the Bay. But the great news is that stormwater can be managed: the technology is available.”

Making low-impact development a common practice will help reverse the downward trend of water quality in the Potomac River. “Stormwater management is one of the most important pieces of urban environmental protection,” said George Hawkins, Director of the District Department of the Environment. “Containing and treating stormwater will always be important. But businesses and governments are learning how to keep runoff from happening in the first place. Nature absorbs a lot of stormwater, which is why you can walk through a forest in a rain storm and barely get wet. So the next frontier is bringing nature back into urban areas. Doing so will also create hundreds of green-collar jobs, which will help residents improve their neighborhoods and build a better future.”

"We can't continue to pollute the water in this way, especially when we have the solutions at hand," says Belin. "We believe that widespread use of low impact development practices will prevent stormwater pollution at its source, which is always more cost-efficient than waiting to clean up a polluted river."

As Dr. Robert Gardner, director of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science's Appalachian Laboratory, put it: "This new report on the 'State of the Nation's River' clearly shows that the health and sustainability of Potomac is being threatened by the rapid development of its watershed. New strategies are required to reduce runoff from hardened surfaces and the massive amounts of pollutants that runoff now carries into the Potomac. The good news is that cost-effective alternatives exist that simultaneously reduce hardened surfaces and improve water quality in the Potomac. I hope that we take this report seriously so that we can continue to enjoy the beauty and productivity of the nation's river."

About Potomac Conservancy

Since 1993, the Potomac Conservancy has protected the health, beauty, and enjoyment of the Potomac River and its tributaries. Its conservation programs address the goals of improving water quality, protecting the river's scenic integrity, enhancing recreational resources, and building an informed and engaged constituency, using a range of tools, including restoration, permanent protection, advocacy, and citizen education and engagement. For additional information, visit www.potomac.org.

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