

Baltimore waterways healthier, study says

Dramatic drop in levels of fecal bacteria last year surprises scientists

BY SCOTT DANCE

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Levels of fecal bacteria in Baltimore streams fell dramatically — and somewhat inexplicably — last year, according to a water quality report released Monday.

Though environmental advocates acknowledge that goals of a “swimmable, fishable” harbor won’t become reality by 2020, as they pledged in 2010, they are cheering data in the Healthy Harbor Initiative’s first “Harbor Heartbeat” report that shows it was safe to swim in some parts of the Jones Falls and Patapsco River nearly all of last summer.

They said the improvement could be linked to lower rainfall last year than in other recent years, but credit was also due to efforts in Baltimore City and Baltimore County to rehabilitate decrepit sewer systems and to reduce, capture or filter stormwater runoff from urban and suburban pavement.

It shocked the scientists who have been observing water quality at the same points around Baltimore-area waterways for the past five years.

“At first we questioned our own methods,” said Alice Volpitta, water quality manager for Blue Water Baltimore, which collects the samples used in the report. “We weren’t sure if the change we were seeing was real, or if it was a fluke.”

The water quality advocates say that it appears pollution is indeed decreasing, but it’s too early to be sure the trend is legitimate.

“This is not an indication that we should throw our hands up and say, ‘Mission accomplished,’ at all, but it is an indication that maybe we are starting to see the fruits of some of our labor,” said Jenn Aiosa, Blue Water Baltimore’s executive director. “I’m going to withhold judgment until next year, and the following year, and the following year.

“It’s only going to be that monitoring over time that will give us the confidence to say, ‘Wow, we really are moving in the right direction,’ or, ‘Unfortunately, that was just a blip.’ ”

Fecal bacteria routinely washes into streams and, eventually, the Chesapeake Bay, through cracks and breaks in century-old sewage pipes. During heavy rain, stormwater-diluted sewage also flows directly into the Jones Falls through outflows that were part of the original design of Baltimore’s sewer system. Those outflows must be closed by 2022 to bring the city into compliance with the federal Clean Water Act.

The bacteria makes urban waterways unsafe for human contact much of the time. But sampling between last May and September shows that waterways were increasingly safe and clean last year.

Safe levels of bacteria were reported in 100 percent of samples taken from waters including the Jones Falls just south of Lake Roland, in the main stem of the Patapsco River near the Francis Scott Key Bridge and leading into the Baltimore harbor, and in Curtis Bay.

Some areas were markedly more contaminated. Safe levels of bacteria were reported only 20 percent of the time in parts of the Gwynns Falls, 50 percent of the time in the Inner Harbor and at the mouth of the non-tidal portion of the Patapsco near Cherry Hill, and 60 percent of the time in the Stony Run and the lower Jones Falls.

Still, all measurement sites around the Jones and Gwynns falls showed better scores in 2017 than in 2016.

The “Harbor Heartbeat” report replaces a report card the harbor initiative has released since 2014. It had issued grades as high as a C-minus for some segments of waterways, but never any passing grades for overall waterway health.

Adam Lindquist, executive director of the Healthy Harbor Initiative, said the report card focused on what he called “lagging” metrics, while the new report adds information about “leading” indicators that advocates hope will later create ecosystem improvements.

The new report shows that the city is 73 percent of the way toward completing work related to a federal consent decree that requires it to reduce sewage pollution.

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