

MDE: Brown-orange gunk coming from Back River plant was partially treated sewage | Baltimore Brew

The stinky liquid that *The Brew* found [emptying out](#) of Baltimore's Back River Waste Water Treatment Plant on Saturday was a mixture of suspended solids, dead plankton, shelled amoeba, dead insect larvae and moderate to heavy levels of bacteria.

In response to a complaint by the Back River Restoration Committee, water samples were taken at the same outfall pier on Sunday by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE).

Lab tests found that the brown-and-orange gunk was “consistent [with] partially but not completely treated” sewage, but “is not equivalent to raw sewage or feces.”

In addition to high particulate matter, the samples included dead midge larvae. Swarms of the gnats were seen Saturday hovering around the outfall pier.

Last November, Baltimore County began the [aerial spraying](#) of 50 acres of open water near the treatment plant with a Bti-based larvacide to kill midge and mosquito larvae.

• [What the wastewater looks – and smells – like coming out of the Back River sewage plant](#)

The spray does not harm people, fish, crabs or other aquatic invertebrates, but increases bacteria in the water and “could contribute to bacteria concentrations found in samples,” MDE said today, which can cause vomiting and nausea if ingested by humans.

County Executive Johnny Olszewski announced on Monday that spraying will be [expanded this summer](#) to 1,200 acres of upper Back River to try to eradicate the midge nuisance.

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State Delegate Robin Grammer Jr. (R-Essex) said the question of whether the plant spews out “raw sewage” or “highly concentrated solids” has become a distraction and word game.

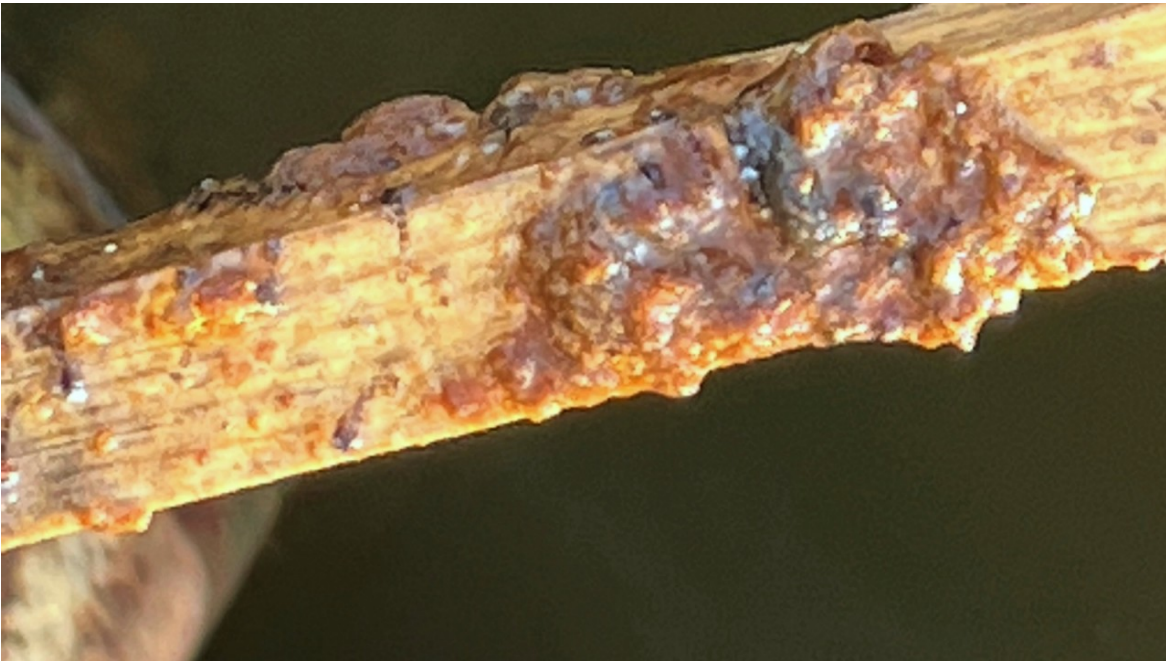
“Based on what we’re seeing, the Back River plant is at the point of failure. We should stop beating around the bush,” he said today.

Manager Replaced

MDE took over the plant from Baltimore's Department of Public Works last month, citing a [precipitous decline](#) in its ability to treat the 120 million gallons of wastewater that daily pass through its mechanical and biological processes.

About 400 city employees are now under the supervision of Maryland Environmental Service, a quasi-public agency.

Since the takeover, Elizabeth “Betty” Jacobs has been replaced as plant manager by Ronald Turner, sources tell *The Brew*.



Turner is a 38-year DPW veteran who was recently listed as the plant's stormwater pollution prevention and environmental quality resources manager.

Jacobs' ouster, after serving for less than a year, marks another management shuffle by DPW's water bureau head Yosef Kebede.

Former supervisor Andre Johnson says that inexperienced and poorly directed management [lies at the root](#) of Back River's decline, despite more than \$500 million spent on new "headworks" and other physical improvements.

Controlling and removing the solids that befoul the plant's equipment and lead to illegal discharges of phosphorus, grease and other pollutants into Back River are MDE's top priority.

But Johnson and others say that fixing management at DPW may prove the greater challenge.