

CHESAPEAKE

BAY JOURNAL

June 2022

Volume 32 Number 4

Independent environmental news for the Chesapeake region



50 years later: Killer storm Agnes haunts Bay watershed

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Desiree Greaver of the Back River Restoration Committee holds a water sample collected near the outfall of Baltimore's Back River wastewater treatment plant. Read the article on page 12. (Dave Harp)

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EDITOR'S NOTE



The anniversary of Agnes

This month marks the 50th anniversary of Hurricane Agnes, which was a tropical storm by the time it reached the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Agnes didn't travel directly up the Bay. But the torrential rainfall was devastating and deadly. People lost their lives, homes, schools and businesses. The Bay's ecosystem was slammed with polluted runoff. As you'll read in our article by Jeremy Cox on page 18, the impacts on clams, shad and underwater grasses reverberate today.

In May, I listened to a panel discussion hosted by the Chesapeake Research Consortium about the lessons learned from Agnes. The guests spoke about the vast improvements in public warning systems, watershed science and stormwater management strategies. They generally agreed that, if such a storm were to hit again, there would probably be fewer lives lost. But — despite those gains in knowledge and practices — damage to the Bay and the region's infrastructure would likely be even worse.

That's a sobering irony. We know more now, but the environmental outcome may still be worse. There are several factors driving that prediction. Among them are the force of recent storms and rising water levels that spur even "sunny day flooding."

The panel guests also cited the extent to which we have paved and roofed our way over much of the landscape during the last 50 years, adding surfaces that amplify the speed and volume of runoff while robbing waterways of natural floodplains. When you read Jeremy's article, be sure to also read Tim Wheeler's report on high resolution imagery of the Bay watershed on page 10. Those images have revealed 45% more impervious cover regionwide than previously estimated.

Ultimately, storms the magnitude of Agnes are literally a force of nature. Many stormwater management practices can't be expected to withstand that kind of test. But as stewards of the land under our feet and the water that runs through it, we must ask why "knowing more" doesn't mean less damage. The lessons of Agnes, in a world out of balance, still wait to be heard.

— Lara Lutz



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ON THE COVER

Water from Tropical Storm Agnes inundates homes in Wilkes Barre, PA, in late June 1972. (Courtesy of Wilkes University)

Bottom photos: Left by Dave Harp, center by Jim Lyons and right courtesy of the Vessel Disposal and Reuse Foundation.

Disgruntled residents monitor Back River for pollution

Community responds to lapses at wastewater treatment plant on ailing Baltimore river

By Timothy B. Wheeler

Karen Wolf's family has owned a house on Baltimore's Back River since the 1920s. Generations have grown up there, on and in the water.

Lately, though, Wolf has been questioning whether it's safe to let her grandchildren go out on their pontoon boat. She's worried they might get sick from being splashed by water tainted with sewage from the city's problem-plagued wastewater treatment plant upriver.

"The river used to be teeming with people and activities," she said. "What are we going to do if we can't use our river?"

Residents living along the waterfront in Baltimore County have been up in arms since March, when dead shad and "black poop" were reported in the river near the Back River wastewater treatment plant. An inspector from the Maryland Department of the Environment visited the plant, where he found badly broken equipment, poor maintenance and multiple pollution violations.

The plant's woes have drawn the scrutiny of the Back River Restoration Committee, a nonprofit that residents formed in 2009 with the aim of restoring the health of the tidal portion of the river.

Frustrated by what they see as a lack of urgency or openness by state and local officials, the committee has teamed up with the environmental group, Blue Water Baltimore, to begin monitoring the river's water quality themselves.

Back River has long been considered one of, if not the most polluted, of the Chesapeake Bay's tributaries. Every year since 1986, the Back River and nearby Patapsco River, which together bracket Baltimore, have earned the worst scores in the Bay health report cards issued by the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

In recent years, though, UMCES detected an "improving trend" in the region. Residents thought they saw the same uptick, which seemed to coincide with a \$285 million upgrade of the nutrient removal facilities at the city-owned Back River plant.

"We could see the water clarity was visibly improving," said Desiree Greaver, the Back River Restoration Committee's project manager. The most obvious problems, they thought, were litter washed into the river from the heavily developed watershed



Mike Baumgartner, president of the Back River Restoration Committee, sniffs a water sample collected by Desiree Greaver, the committee's project manager, near the outfall of Baltimore's Back River wastewater treatment plant. (Dave Harp)

and swarms of "midges," gnat-like flies that plague boaters and waterfront residents in warm weather.

Then came news last August that state inspectors, acting on a tip from Blue Water Baltimore, had discovered serious pollution violations at the city's wastewater treatment plants on the Back and Patapsco rivers.

MDE demanded immediate corrective actions, then filed suit against the city in January. By late March, with a new inspection finding still more problems with equipment failures and maintenance lapses, state regulators seized control of the plant.

Residents' alarm spiked in mid-April, when water samples analyzed by Blue Water Baltimore detected elevated bacteria in the river, including one reading upstream of the wastewater plant that was more than 180 times greater than what's considered safe for human contact.

That prompted MDE and Baltimore County to announce they would begin regular sampling for bacteria in the river. MDE joined the state Department of Health to warn the public to avoid contact with Back River.

At the same time, the county posted a "water contact advisory" sign in Cox's Point



Harbor Waterkeeper Alice Volpitta instructs Back River volunteers on proper techniques for water sample collection. (Dave Harp)

Park across the river from the treatment plant. The sign has since disappeared, to the dismay of activists and residents. Greaver said she's been unable to get an explanation for its removal.

Since then, water samples have mostly showed low bacteria levels, though MDE and Blue Water Baltimore both have reported intermittent spikes in bacteria above the safe level at the outfall as well as up and downriver from it.

But David Lykens, director of the county's Department of Environmental Protection and Sustainability, said that since late April, "we're finding pretty good levels, actually

swimmable levels," in the open river.

He suggested that the high bacteria readings obtained by others were misleading, likely the result of heavy rains a day or two before sampling. Rainstorms tend to trigger sewage overflows from the aging, leaky sewer systems in the city and county. They also wash animal waste and other organic material off streets and parking lots into the river's tributaries.

Nevertheless, Blue Water Baltimore and the Back River committee have recruited local residents to collect water from their piers, shoreline or favorite spots along the river. Alice Volpitta, Blue Water's Harbor Waterkeeper, said the effort is an extra check on water quality, but it's aimed mainly at engaging local residents in the river's welfare.

"The folks in this area, they're experiencing what people in Baltimore city have been dealing with for decades," she said. Blue Water Baltimore has filed its own suit against the city over pollution violations at its treatment plants and has sought to hold the city accountable for its sewer system overflows.

While many Baltimore County residents think the river's woes are solely the city's fault because of the treatment plant, Volpitta said, it's their problem as well. Back River and most of its watershed is in the county.

Under state consent decrees, the city and county have collectively spent billions of dollars in the past 20-plus years to fix their overflow-prone sewer systems. The county also has spent more than \$16 million since the 1990s on projects to limit stormwater pollution.

On a warm day in mid-May, about 30 county residents showed up at Cox's Point Park to pick up water sampling kits and learn how to use them. They planned to collect water from their docks or favorite waterfront spots just before Memorial Day weekend and publicize the results.

"Your voices combined," Volpitta told them, "that collective voice of all of you, saying, 'I care, this is what the water quality is like off my dock where I recreate, where I boat,' all of those voices combined are going to result in change."

Among those present to learn how to sample the river was Karen Wolf.

"We have to hold them accountable," she said. ■