

Report: Patuxent's health slipping

By PAMELA WOOD
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UPPER MARLBORO — The health of the Patuxent River is “backsliding” and faces further decline if action isn’t taken soon to restore Maryland’s longest river, activists charged yesterday.

The Patuxent Riverkeeper Program, which monitors and protects the river, released its special “Patuxent 20/20” report, which lays out dozens of actions needed to boost the Patuxent, including cracking down on polluters and reining in growth.

Jennifer Bevan-Dangel, the riverkeeper program’s executive director, said the report aims to answer questions from citizens about why actions aren’t being taken to improve the river. The report also provides a blueprint for lawmakers



BEVAN-DANGEL



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who want to help the river.

In a press conference at the Queen Anne 4-H Center, Ms. Bevan-Dangel said the thinking behind the report was: “OK, there’s 100 things that can be done, let’s do them one by one.”

The list admittedly is long, she said.

But it’s vital to attack the solutions if there’s to be any hope of restoring the Patuxent to its former glory.

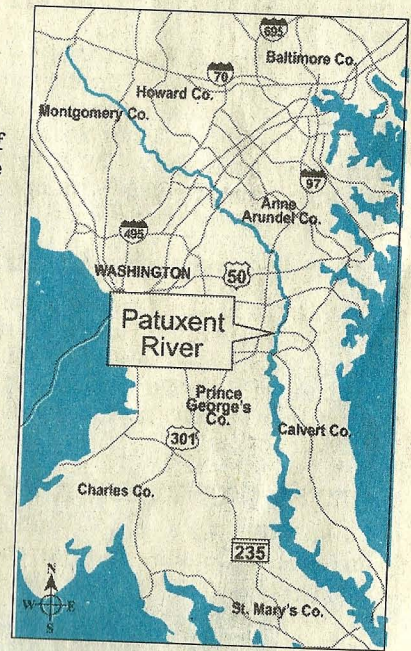
The Patuxent is 110 miles long and snakes through seven Maryland counties, from its headwaters near Mount Airy to where it meets the Chesapeake Bay at Solomons Island.

The river runs along the southwestern edge of Anne Arundel County, forming the border with Prince George’s County.

As recently as the 1950s, the Patuxent supported a thriving fishing industry and the water was completely clear several feet deep, Ms. Bevan-Dangel said.

But rapid suburban development and sewage-plant discharges sullied the river with sediment and excess nutrients.

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Capital graphic

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RIVER

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The slow climb back to health started in the late 1970s following legal actions and the impassioned advocacy of former state Sen. Bernie Fowler.

The resulting gains in the 1980s are gradually being wiped out due to suburban development, Ms. Bevan-Dangel said.

"In the last 10 years or so, we saw those gains backslide," she said.

Dr. Margaret Palmer, director of the University of Maryland's Chesapeake Biological Lab, said the report was a "scientifically informed action plan."

She said there's been enough research at her lab and elsewhere to know what needs to be done to help the river.

"We've never been at this point before in terms of the scientific knowledge of the problems and how to fix them," she said.

Some of the plan's key recommendations include:

- Slowing growth and planning for it as counties and towns update their comprehen-

sive plans, including limiting development in rural areas.

- Tightening rules for controlling stormwater in new developments, while setting up funds to pay for fixing existing stormwater problems.

- Limiting the use of septic systems, while continuing to upgrade sewage-treatment plants so they remove more nitrogen.

- Increasing the number of inspectors and boosting enforcement of existing environmental laws.

The report has been in the works since last fall, when river advocates convened for a summit on the state of the river. It's been through several rounds of review by other environmental groups and political leaders.

Ms. Bevan-Dangel said the report has been well-received, but that when politicians are pressed about which of the recommendations they'll support, "That's when you get the frantic backpedaling of scurrying feet."

Still, she holds out hope there's enough interest in the river to move the recommendations forward.