Kullen touts Patuxent environmental cleanup measure

BY ALAN BRODY
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Standing on a pier overlooking the Patuxent River's murky brown waters, a Calvert County lawmaker joined environmental advocates in calling for aggressive clean-up of the contaminated waterway.

Del. Sue Kullen touted legislation that would regulate the amount of nitrogen discharged from several dozen wastewater treatment plants into the river.

Proponents said a 1981 agreement that aimed to reduce the flow of nitrogen and phosphorus into the Patuxent River was never enforced and the river's health has continued to deteriorate as more pollution enters the waterway daily.

"Lots of days we're pedaling backwards," said Kullen (D-Calvert), who sponsored the House bill with Del. John L. Bohanan Jr. (D-St. Mary's).

During last year's interim, a legislative committee was created to examine options for addressing the health of the Patuxent River. The legislation is a product of that committee's work, Kullen said.

Several lawmakers assailed a bill in the Senate that would give funding priority to Patuxent River clean-up efforts because it could de-prioritize restoration projects in other areas of the state.

But Kullen expects her measure will be better received because it focuses on improving the water quality without siphoning funds from other waterways.

"If we set these caps and they are basically respected, the river will come back and it will come back quickly," she said. If adopted, the legislation would set the total maximum daily load for nitrogen within the Patuxent River Watershed at 1,200 pounds per day.

The bill, which will be heard Friday in the House Environmental Matters Committee, "puts some teeth in existing rhetoric," said Fred Tutman, who is a member of the Patuxent Riverkeepers, a citizen group that advocates for water quality.

"This is really not something that is radical or revolutionary," Proponents contend that efforts to restore the gigantic Chesapeake Bay are futile if its tributaries cannot be cleaned up, as well.

"We're drawing a line in the sand, or a line in the river, as it were," said Tutman, noting that methods used to clean up the Patuxent will chart a course for refurbishing the bay.

Hazardous chemicals have "poisoned" the river that used to be a favorite commercial fishing site, he added.

"I meet fishermen who say they don't eat what they catch," Tutman said, noting that the state posts advisories warning about the amount of fish that should be consumed.

James Dudley, who has lived on the waterfront in Hallowing Point for 25 years, has an unscientific method for measuring the river's water quality.

"What I go by is the activity on the water," he said. "When I moved here, there wasn't a day when there weren't fishing boats on the water."

The river's crab population has also significantly diminished and the water color has seen a marked change, he said.

A fiscal note for the bill has not been posted, but advocates said money could be drawn from the Bay Restoration Fund to pay for the strengthened regulations.

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