It's hard to picture Bernie Fowler mad. During his long and illustrious career, he's seen many things, from war hero to waterman to politician to environmental activist. In all his endeavors, we have never seen him anything but calm, courteous and unfailingly reasonable.

Apparently, though, the continuing disgraceful neglect of his beloved Patuxent River has the former state senator angry, and willing to express himself.

Appointed head of the do-nothing Patuxent River Commission by the new administration of Gov. Martin O'Malley (D), Fowler, in his first meeting in the big chair, ripped the members and their lack of effort and, especially, results in cleaning up the river.

We detailed his righteous indignation in a front page story in the Friday, May 11 edition. The commission has become nothing but a talking shop, committed to "education" efforts and an unwillingness to rock the boat. Some of this is not the current members' fault. The commission has around 30 members, from all sorts of different agencies, local governments and various other groups deemed to be, in the fashionable term, "stakeholders" in the health of the river. Not all of them are useless — the Patuxent Riverkeeper, Fred Tutman, has done a fine job in his role as the main advocate for the river and some of the members represent agencies that are trying to do a good job — but the time for the commission to meet and talk is over.

The Patuxent doesn't need stakeholders anymore. It needs impassioned activists who care deeply about the health of the river and the effect the health of the river has on the health of the Chesapeake Bay. It does not need a committee composed of time-serving bureaucrats filling in another line on their resumes.

Fowler's vision of the river is simple and compelling. The Patuxent, his argument goes, is the only river the watershed of which is entirely within the bounds of Maryland. That means that no other cooperation is needed than that of the state government to implement the radical change in philosophy that the river needs. The government must not study any longer; it must not set regulations for different levels of nutrients and other pollutants in the river and call it a day. The state government must mandate that the river be cleaned up, not that its regulations be followed. We know, after years of study, what needs to be done with septic tanks, sewage plants, best practices for farms, lawn chemicals and all the rest of the million-and-one ways the river gets polluted. It's time for the state — and local jurisdictions, tourism industry representatives and businesses, and citizens — to put the money behind the studies and get the job done.

It will be expensive, as all major environmental cleanups are. But the cost of continuing down the path of doing too little is much more costly. The Chesapeake Bay will die, and only mats of algae and jellyfish will live there. Without sport fishing, crab cakes, pleasant beaches and beautiful bay views, the tourists will come no more. With no tourists, the economy of many coastal counties will deteriorate; in Calvert the non-energy economy would essentially cease to exist.

We don't blame Fowler for being mad. It's time for action, not talk.