

Experts say recent Chesapeake Bay report lacks clarity

Argue it doesn't enhance public knowledge of watershed's health

By AMANDA SCOTT

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Although a new Chesapeake Bay health report highlights restoration efforts, and may illustrate lag time between clean-up and results, local experts are saying the report doesn't say if the bay is healthier.

On Nov. 27, the Chesapeake Bay Program released its 2012-2013 Bay Barometer: Health and Restoration in the Chesapeake Watershed report, which collects and summarizes the program's most recent data on water quality, pollution loads and other indicators of bay health. CBP is a regional partnership that has led and directed bay restoration efforts since 1983. The organization's partners include the states of Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia, the District of Columbia, tri-state legislative body Chesapeake Bay Commission, the Environmental Protection Agency and participating citizen advisory groups.

"Though indicators of ecological health continue to reflect the reality of an impaired Bay, our restoration work and efforts to reduce the flow of nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment into rivers and streams give Bay officials cause for optimism," a CBP news release about the report states. "Similarly, new data provides insights on lag times across the watershed, or that period of time that occurs between restoration work and visible improvements in water quality."

The report highlights several restoration efforts, such as planting 285 more miles of forested buffers, the creation or re-establishment of 2,231 acres of wetlands and 34 more miles of streams opened for migratory fish to reach spawning grounds.

The report points to increasing numbers of American shad, female crabs and rockfish, as well as reducing nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment loads by 25, 27 and 32 percents, respectively, since 2009.

But the report also states that only 29 percent of the bay's tidal areas met water quality standards, 74 percent of 92 tidal areas analyzed were positive for chemical contaminants and underwater grasses declined for a third year in a row.

"None of this serves to enhance the public understanding of how far we have to go," Patuxent Riverkeeper CEO Fred Tutman said of the report. "... This is a 'so what?' report card. It doesn't give you the information to understand if the water is better or worse," or if the restoration efforts are actually working.

The Patuxent Riverkeeper is a nonprofit watershed advocacy organization affiliated with the Waterkeeper Alliance in New York, with the sole purpose of protecting, restoring and advocating for clean water in the Patuxent River and its connected ecosystems.

Morgan State University's Patuxent Environmental and Aquatic Research Laboratory Director Kelton Clark said the report "provides a picture of the type of work the CBP is doing to help make it a clean ecosystem," but it doesn't detail the connection between people and the bay's health.

"The point is the health is not the bay's problem. The bay's health is our problem. I would be happier if I could see that direct connection," Clark said.

The PEARL, formerly known as the Estuarine Research Center, is a facility at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum in St. Leonard, where research is conducted to increase the understanding of coastal ecosystems so they might be properly managed and protected.

Clark said he thinks the report would better serve the people and help people to understand their role in the bay's health if it discussed the amount of impervious surfaces and its effects, septic systems, wastewater treatment facilities and many other factors.

CBP's director, Nick DiPasquale, said in the news release, "Determining the current health of the bay and its tributaries is as complex as the ecosystem itself. Although we would like to see more immediate results from our actions, we will have to exercise persistence and patience as the actions we take to rebuild balance and resilience back into this complex ecosystem take effect and show up in the data from our monitoring networks."

In a statement released Dec. 3, Chesapeake Bay Foundation's senior water quality scientist Beth McGee said, "This report is a sobering reminder that although we have made progress in reducing pollution, we still have a long way to go to restore local rivers, streams, and the Chesapeake Bay. Because some factors influencing restoration progress ... are beyond our control, we must focus on factors we can control. Efforts to restore wetlands and forested buffers are far behind what is needed to achieve the 2025 goals [mandated by the EPA]. Local jurisdictions need increased support to reduce urban and suburban polluted runoff, the only major pollution source continuing to grow. And more progress must be made to reduce pollution from other sources, including agriculture, septic systems, air and sewage."

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