

# Health Worries Over Bay Pollution

Uneven Testing, Tourism Concerns Affect Reporting

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Dirty water and contaminated fish in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries pose a public health threat, but spotty monitoring and tourism industry worries can block the public from learning the full picture, health experts say.

Millions of people swim, boat and fish in the region's waterways every year with no ill effects. But the water is so dirty that public health officials warn people who swim in it to wash with soap afterward and to avoid entering the water with an open wound.

A new report being released today says more than 40 Maryland beaches, including several on the bay, violated public health standards at least a quarter of the times they were tested. [The report issued by the Natural Resources Defense Council](#) -- which documented more than 20,000 days of ocean, bay and Great Lakes beach closures and advisories nationwide last year -- placed three of Maryland's bay beaches among its worst offenders. All three are on the Eastern Shore.

Maryland ranks among the 10 worst states for beaches that fail to meet national health standards, according to the report. Yet the state does not require that a contaminated beach be closed -- except after raw sewage spills of at least 10,000 gallons.

Virginia fared far better in the report, ranking among the top five for meeting federal standards. Still, the state tests mostly coastal beaches, not most rivers.

"It's 100 degrees outside. People should be able to go to the beach and swim and know that they won't get sick," said Nancy Stoner of the council's Clean Water Project. "There's a lot better information now than there ever was before. But what we're finding is that monitoring is detecting problems, but we're not doing anything about it."

In this coastal region, it seems easier to discover pollution's impact on sea grass than on people. No single agency is charged with finding and alerting the public to waterborne health hazards. Fish- and water-quality monitoring falls to a patchwork of government bodies, students and volunteers. Results are spread across Web sites in two states, making it difficult, especially for tourists, to fully gauge the risks.

In 2004, Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health worked with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to link pollution and its human health impact. The effort ran out of money before it got off the ground.

"We're not spending enough money and time figuring out the best ways to monitor the water we swim in and the fish we eat, and on a better means of informing and warning

the public," said Polly Walker of the Johns Hopkins center involved in the project. "That's not to say things are terrible. But without a monitoring system in place, we won't know when they are."

The information that does reach the public often provokes objections from fishing and tourism interests. "Every story that gets written about the health of the bay hurts my industry," said Susan Zellers, director of the Marine Trades Association of Maryland, an industry lobbying group.

With out-of-state boaters pouring \$154 million annually into Maryland, she said, "we're all about [saying], 'Everything's fine.' "

But not everything is fine. In September 2004, Jim Byers, a veteran kayaker from Bethesda, headed onto the Potomac after a big rain, eager for a challenging run through flood-stage waters. Two weeks later, Byers, 51, felt pain in his legs so severe that he dropped to his dining room floor.

He wound up in the hospital with a 105-degree temperature and a stomach infection that stumped his doctors. As his condition worsened, his wife got a call from a fellow kayaker, who asked whether he'd been tested for leptospirosis, a bacterial disease caused by contact with animal waste, probably washed into the river by the rain.

Byers, a Potomac kayaker for two decades, had never heard of it.

The guess proved right. Byers spent months recuperating -- and it rattles him that he could have died. "I'm not what you call an educated consumer," he said. "I don't think a lot of people are."

Sally Hornor stood on a pier off a tiny Severn River beach in Annapolis one recent morning, filling a sample bottle while teenage girls smoothed on sunscreen nearby.

"We always look for an area where kids would swim the most," said Hornor, of Anne Arundel Community College, dipping her bottle into pale green water at the private beach, one of about 20 she monitors. "On a typical day something like a quarter of the sites do not meet the recommendations."

The federal government provides money to encourage states to monitor water at public beaches but does not require it. According to the report, Virginia monitors 55 beaches weekly, mostly along the coast. Maryland tests 179 coastal and estuary spots, from once a week to once a month.

Maryland leaves county health departments to decide what beaches to test and how often, when to close a contaminated area and how to tell the public.

The Anne Arundel County Health Department, for instance, monitors 530 miles of shoreline and 101 public beaches with one staff member and three students. Despite a

season of heavy rain that sent bacterial numbers skyrocketing, the county has issued three advisories and closed one beach, at Bear Neck Creek near Edgewater, after a massive sewage spill June 28. Bacteria sent two residents who entered the water near the spill to the hospital, said Bob Gallagher, riverkeeper for the West and Rhode rivers, near the spill.

Beaches in St. Mary's County in Southern Maryland and Kent on the Eastern Shore rank among the state's worst offenders in the national report. But a visitor probably wouldn't know that. The Environmental Protection Agency's beach Web site is not kept up-to-date, Stoner said. Maryland state Web sites refer bathers to county sites. Often, the sites don't include full information about precautions, or the consequences of contact with contaminated water.

"I don't want to scare anyone away from the water," Gallagher said. "But people are going to get more scared if they learn about other people getting sick and they don't have adequate information."

The same lack of regulation and consistency also affects those who catch dinner in the region's waters.

The federal government has set standards for the level of mercury and PCBs in fish sold commercially, but it does not require states to issue consumption advisories for fish caught by recreational anglers.

Most states have some form of advisory program, but its quality often depends on its funding, said Tim Fitzgerald, a scientist for Environmental Defense, a national advocacy group.

"Some states are more cautious than others," said Dan Soeder, a hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Baltimore. "Fishing is a state tourist thing, and if you're telling people they can't eat the fish, that isn't good."

In Virginia, a list of advisories is available on state Web sites and in offices, bait and tackle stores, libraries and fishing groups, said Khizar Wasti, director of public health toxicology at the state Department of Health, which compiles them. The state also posts advisories on waterways, he said.

When Maryland created its current guidelines in 2001, "charter boat captains [had] a lot of concern it was going to hurt their business," recalled Joseph Beaman, chief of the chemical assessment division at the Department of the Environment. "The [Department of Natural Resources] was like, 'Oh, my God, we're gonna lose all our license business.' "

The state offers its advisory guide on its Web site, at state women's health centers and environmental offices and with fishing licenses. When he tried placing it at tackle shops, "they threw them out," Beaman said.

Except for a few locations, the warnings are not posted on waterways.

"If you worded it the right way, there might be a way to do that," he said. "But if you have a lot of people with vested interests, they don't necessarily like the information being out there."

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