



News

Chesapeake Bay health gets C-minus

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Published: Sunday, April 5, 2009 4:34 AM CDT

EASTON The health of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries remained poor in 2008 and has not improved since 2007, according to researchers at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

The team of scientists who wrote the report gave the Bay a grade of C-minus.

The Upper Eastern Shore, including portions of Queen Anne's and Talbot counties, all of Kent County and the Chester River, received a 27 percent, a decrease from 33 percent in 2007 and the lowest score in 17 years. Water clarity in 2008 was very poor, scoring 5 percent, due to a recent loss of aquatic grasses, according to the report summary.

The Lower Eastern Shore, including parts of Caroline and Dorchester counties and the Tangier Sound, received a 41 percent water clarity rating, its best in more than 20 years of monitoring, but still poor. The report also suggests a small recovery of aquatic grasses after losses in 2003 and 2006.

"What's apparent is that the Eastern Shore is really being impacted by agriculture run-off so it definitely needs some help," said Dr. William Dennison, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science researcher at Horn Point and project leader.

Chicken manure can be a resource, not waste; nutrients and dirt that end up in the Bay need to be used as fertilizer and dirt on farms and lawns.

"It's better for farmers and homeowners to grow things with it; what's lost in the Bay is misplaced and causes pollution," he said.

To help, farmers can take advantage of subsidies from the Maryland Department of Environment for cover crops and homeowners of waterfront property can take advantage of subsidies for enhanced nutrient removal for their septic systems.

In addition to the annual analysis of the Bay's tidal waters, for the first time scientists also collected ecological data from more than 3,200 monitoring sites across the Bay's drainage basin.

The data suggests that streams throughout the region are degrading, especially near urban or industrial areas.

"The health of local streams is almost always the direct result of how we manage the land around them," said Dr. Margaret Palmer, UMCES stream ecologist and Chesapeake Biological Laboratory director. "This new watershed-wide look at the health of the Bay's streams tells us we need to be doing more to protect and restore them. Without healthy streams, we will not be able to have a healthy Bay."

The Choptank River's score decreased from a 37 percent in 2007 to 28 percent in 2008. Water clarity decreased in 2008 and while aquatic grasses have declined during the past 6 years, there has been a slight recovery of phytoplankton, increasing from 2 percent in 2004 to 18 percent in 2008.

Looking at 20 years of data collected from the Choptank River, what's apparent is that its health is degrading, Dennison said.

"It bounces around and it is the most variable tributary and we think it's entirely driven by diffused non-point sources," Dennison said.

The amount of rainfall in the area can influence how much nutrients and sediment enter the Bay. For example, in 2002 the bay scored at 55 percent because there were several years of low rainfall. Then after the wet conditions of 2003, the health of the Bay deteriorated to a 36 percent, and has not recovered quickly.

In other areas, like the James River, health is improving, he said.

"In those areas we see grasses in clear water and fish coming back, the Choptank is not so pretty," Dennison said.

The hope is that the successful work in improving areas can be imitated in Talbot, Caroline and Dorchester counties. One example is hiring a river keeper for the Choptank.

"We need to step it up like they did at the Chester River where they have a volunteer army that tests and monitors the trends, that's what's lacking," Dennison said. "We encourage training volunteers and creating partnerships with universities. That's where we'll make changes, in tributaries."

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