



News

Choptank 'D' graded

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DENTON While the Chesapeake Bay earned a "C-" in terms of health from environmental organization Chesapeake EcoCheck, the Choptank River received the lower score of a "D," prompting the Caroline County Office of Planning, Codes and Engineering to hold a symposium on potential causes for and methods of improving the waterway's condition.

The meeting was held June 23 in Denton's Health and Public Services building, featuring a large panel of presenters that included officials from local and state agencies and environmental scientists.

The Bay's and the Choptank's grades were given by the EcoCheck project, based in Oxford and formed as a partnership by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

Dr. Heath Kelsey, who holds a doctorate in environmental health sciences, said the 2008 Chesapeake Bay report card focused on stream health indicators using two different sets of indicators.

Kelsey said the first set of indicators dealt with water quality issues, which were evaluated based on water clarity, chlorophyll A levels and the amount of dissolved oxygen in the water. Chlorophyll A is the pigment that allows plants to absorb sunlight and turn it into energy.

He said the second set created a biotic index, based on the state of the benthic community, aquatic grasses and phytoplankton populations. The benthic community is made of bottom dwelling organisms, such as clams and oysters. Phytoplankton are microscopic organisms.

According to EcoCheck's report, the Choptank's water quality score was a 43 percent, or "C," and the biotic index received a 12 percent, or "F."

Kelsey said nutrient levels like nitrogen and phosphorus are not directly integrated in the report card score, but issues created by them can be seen through their effects on the measured indicators.

Tom Fisher, a professor at the UMCES Horn Point Laboratory on the Choptank near Cambridge, said three quarters of Caroline County lies within the Choptank River basin.

He said there have been consistently increasing levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in the Choptank, coming primarily from three sources: agricultural, poor septic systems and wastewater treatment plants.

"Agriculture is one of the biggest sources of nitrogen and phosphorous in the Choptank," Fisher said.

He said increased nutrient levels can cause high levels of chlorophyll A and lower levels of dissolved oxygen. He said the combined effects of those two issues can lead to problems like fish kills.

"We've got some problems we need to look at," Fisher said.

John Shepard, district manager for the Maryland Department of Agriculture's Caroline Soil Conservation District John Shepard said efforts are being made in the agricultural industry to reduce their activities' effects on the Choptank and the Bay.

"There's a lot of folks in agriculture who have gone above and beyond. And like anything, there are some that certainly still need to step up to the plate," he said.

Speaking about the effects of failing septic systems on the Chesapeake's and the Choptank's health were Adam Corry, from the Caroline County Environmental Health Office, and Bill Wolinski, of the Talbot County Department of Public Works.

Both discussed the availability of money from the Bay Restoration Fund for private homeowners to replace their failing septic systems.

Corry said in Caroline, the priority is given to applicants who live in critical areas and are in need of an upgrade for their septic systems.

Scott Getchell, Denton's Director of Public Works, and Easton Utilities Wastewater Treatment Plant Supervisor Doug Abbott spoke about their treatment plants and efforts in reducing nitrogen and phosphorus outputs from them.

Getchell said the Denton wastewater treatment plant has never had a problem with high phosphorus levels, but did with nitrogen,

with levels of the nutrient shooting up from 2006 to 2008.

"That line is definitely coming back (down)," he said of the nitrogen levels, based on information gathered so far this year.

Abbott said Easton Utilities' wastewater treatment facility's outfall pipe empties into a stream which flows to the Choptank River near the Dover Bridge. He said both nitrogen and phosphorus levels in water released from Easton Utilities dropped as soon as the plant came online in 2007.

To view the EcoCheck report card for the Chesapeake Bay and its feeder rivers online, go to www.eco-check.org.

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