

Getting Clean

Progress Has Been Made, Yet There's So Much More To Do To Improve Our Local Waterways

By Kristen De Deyn Kirk

Back in 2009, the news for Virginia wasn't good. The advocacy group Environment America named the state's waterways the second dirtiest in the country. (Indiana took top "honors" in the group's study that reviewed the amount of pollutants discharged into waterways.)

Recent environmental news is disappointing as well. In December 2014, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality released its Draft 2014 Water Quality Assessment Integrated Report. The final report, covering the quality of waterways in the state from 2007 through 2012, will be filed with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to comply with the United States Clean Water Act, which was passed in 1972 to limit pollutants in waterways.

A five-word summary of the report: Our waterways are still dirty.

The draft notes:

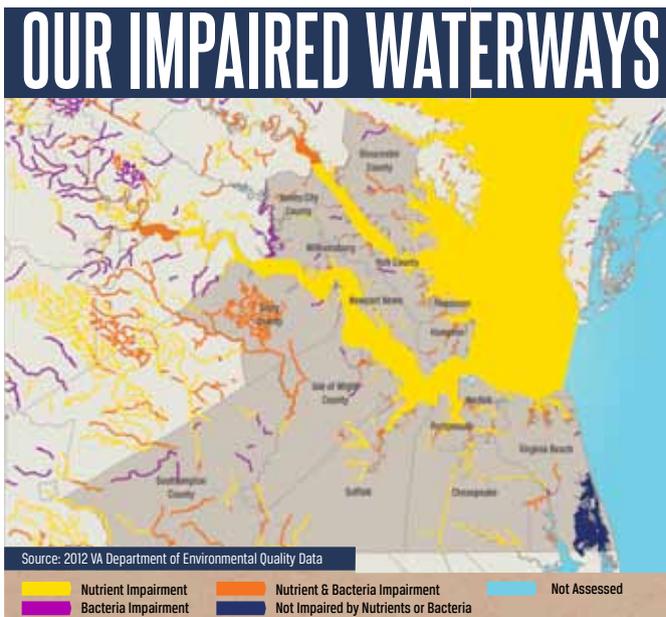
Recreational use of waterways is impaired in 48 percent of the rivers and streams tested. Elevated levels of *E. coli* (*Escherichia coli*) is most often to blame. Agricultural practices, urban runoff, leaking sanitary and storm sewers, and pet waste are major sources of *E. coli*.

Aquatic life is impaired in 29 percent of assessed rivers/streams, 43 percent of assessed lake acres and 86 percent of assessed estuarine waters. Hypoxia (low dissolved oxygen concentration) is the top cause of impairment.

Some of our local waterways named as "impaired" in the report:

Bennett Creek
Chesapeake Bay
Chickahominy River
Deep Creek
Elizabeth River
Hoffler Creek
Indian River
James River
Lafayette River
Lake Drummond
Lake Trashmore
Lake Wright
Nansemond River
Northwest River
Poquoson River
Western Branch Reservoir
Willoughby Bay

Read the draft report and learn about these waterways' challenges at www.deq.virginia.gov under Programs – Water – Water Quality Information.



Joining others to help

Seeing such a long list of local waterways in need of improvement is overwhelming or motivating, depending on how you look at it.

Cleanup plans already exist for some of the locations on the list, and many people from different groups are working toward healthier waterways.

"Everybody is doing something," says Fleta Jackson, public relations specialist for City of Norfolk, Public Works. "The [federal] Clean Water Act got this whole ball rolling. Those efforts trickle down to local governments, NGOs (non-government organizations) and homeowners."

Several local NGOs exist, says Jackson, yet most aren't as well known as the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Elizabeth River Project or Lynnhaven River Now, groups she praises for years of work.

First to pop into Jackson's mind when asked about smaller organizations is Lafayette Wetlands Partnership. She describes the group as a small, grassroots effort with only volunteers and no overhead. They partner with the City of Norfolk and Old Dominion University on restoring shorelines and raising healthy oysters and mussels.

The Lafayette Wetlands Partnership targeted the wetlands on Holly and Columbus avenues in Norfolk in 2013. They were overgrown with phragmites, (non-native, invasive grasses), runoff from nearby development and the lack of stabilizing shoreline vegetation was a concern, and native wetland grasses were being lost.

The group restored 250 linear feet of vegetated wetland, eliminated more than 3,000 square feet of phragmites and planted a buffer of shrubs and flower plants.

On the Peninsula and farther west, the James River Association works to protect the health of the river and its tributaries. They've led efforts since 1976.

Last November, volunteers installed 240 native plantings on Chapel Island in Richmond and removed invasive plant species.

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 JUST DON'T TAKE IT FOR GRANTED.



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In fact, it takes a huge investment in infrastructure and upkeep for water storage, treatment and delivery systems, including 6,500 miles of pipes in Hampton Roads—enough to go across the country and back.

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DAILY SMALL VANILLA SKIM LATTE About \$97.50/month	

For more information on local water, just askHRgreen.org

The association also launched its Our River at Risk campaign that month to publicize threats to the river from the transportation and storage of toxic chemicals. The association has counted 1,100 toxic storage sites along the river's shore, along with up to five billion gallons of coal ash and millions of gallons of crude oil traveling near the river each week. To counteract the threat of these pollutants, the association wants 1,100 new advocates to join in their efforts. They were zeroing in on their goal in late December as this issue went to press, with 725 advocates signing on.

The Lafayette Education Outreach group is a newer organization. Based in Norfolk, they're improving the quality of air, land and water by teaching individuals and businesses simple ways to reduce pollution and increase recycling. They're sponsoring ecoFest on the Lafayette, a spinoff of Elizabeth River Project's annual RiverFest event, on May 2 in Colonial Place along the 600 and 700 blocks of Mayflower Road. The event, with music, art and food, celebrates improvements made to local waterways and also encourages participants to take actions to clean and beautify their neighborhoods, including local waterways, that add to their quality of life.



What can you do? Residents can join one of the many residential programs offered by local watershed restoration groups (Bay Star Homes, River Star Homes, Pearl Homes, etc.). To find a group and a program near you, visit www.askhrgreen.org/watershed-restoration-groups. For most programs, residents pledge to take specific actions at home to improve their environment and, by extension, their community.

Bay Star Homes, a soon-to-be regional program, asks residents to take seven actions selected from four categories "grow green;" "water connections;" "resource conservation;" and "get involved." Examples of activities include: reduce fertilizer and pesticide use; reduce the size of the home's lawn and use more flower beds; redirect downspouts into a planted bed away from a paved surface; use a grease can in the kitchen (instead of pouring grease down a drain); drive fewer miles, bike, combine trips, and use public transportation; and scoop the poop.

"The Elizabeth River Project works with us [City of Norfolk] on the River Star project, and we have 2,000 homes that have earned the status," shares Jackson. "Newport News and Hampton have similar programs. Chesapeake is looking to start one."

She encourages everyone to take action, whether or not their city can officially recognize their efforts.

"There's not a magic wand," Jackson says. "It takes diligence and daily effort."

"Daily efforts" that Jackson suggests:

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| Plant trees | Install low flow faucets and toilets | Recycle |
| Keep your neighborhood litter-free | Reduce or eliminate use of the garbage disposal | Rake leaves to keep them out of the storm drain |
| Scoop your pet's poop | Raise the blades on your lawn mower | |
| Use reusable shopping bags | | |