

RIVERKEEPER'S Almanac

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Your Septic, Our River and What We Can Do

In an effort to reduce excess nitrogen from flowing into the Chester River watershed, Chester River Association has launched an ambitious program to block the pollutant at one of its sources: the family septic system.

As CRA Executive Director Bob Parks frames it: "This is a priority. It's something we feel is impacting local water bodies. It's the sleeping giant no one talks about — but ignoring it will not make it get better."



Jennifer Hicks

"Septic systems are one of the fastest-growing sources of nutrients and nitrogen in our watershed," notes CRA Septic Specialist Jennifer Hicks, who is developing and overseeing the new program. "There are several thousand homes we have to manage for this problem. Contrast this to agriculture, where there are a handful of landowners and farmers to address. For the number of septic systems we have in our watershed, we have to take this seriously. It's our chance to rise to the occasion."

With over 7,200 residential septic systems in the Chester River watershed, and more appearing as new houses are built, the nitrogen challenge has wide reach. Consider: More than half of the homes in Kent and Queen Anne's counties are on septic, contributing 10 percent of the total nitrogen pollution to the river and its tributaries.

"Septic systems are one of the fastest-

CRA's septic initiative has two immediate goals. First, CRA is helping recruit Kent and Queen Anne's county homeowners with septic systems to participate in the Bay Restoration Fund program. Financed by "flush tax" funds, the program pays for the installation of nitrogen-reducing systems on existing septic systems, primarily those located in the Critical Area. Second, CRA is working to make it mandatory for new construction in the Critical Area of the two counties to have nitrogen-reducing systems.

At press time, five home septic systems in Queen Anne's County had been upgraded, and 20 applications received. [Editor's note: Queen Anne's County residents must apply to the Maryland Department of the Environment for funding. Kent County is managing its program locally, with direct support from CRA.]

To date, Hicks has hosted two informational seminars for CRA members who have septic systems in Kent County Critical Areas. A third, open to the public, is planned November 7.

Funding Available

By early October, roughly 15 homeowners in Kent County had applied for funding, a total pot of \$496,000. Quaker Neck homeowners [and CRA members] Richard and Diane Kalter in September became the first homeowners in the county to install a system with grant monies amounting to roughly \$13,000. The grants, administered by county Director of Environmental Health John C. Beskid, cover the cost of the upgrade and five years of maintenance.

The systems, known as Best Available Technology Biological Nutrient Removal Systems, or BAT BNRs, remove nitrogen, which is a nutrient in sewage. Conventional septic systems do not remove nitrogen, which flows into the groundwater, then into the Chester. Nitrogen pollution contributes to algal growth, leading to fish kills and the loss of underwater grasses.

Continued on page 2

Newsflash

A search is under way for a new Chester Riverkeeper following the resignation of stream ecologist Tony Prochaska, the Riverkeeper since early 2006. Watch this space for new developments.

CRA scores *ADVOCACY* win!

Chester River Association successfully spearheaded an effort to stop the construction of a private sewage plant on wooded property off of Lovers Lane, just outside of Chestertown.

CRA is opposed to so-called package plants because they would allow development on land that doesn't perc.

Former Riverkeeper Tony Prochaska brokered the discussions between town and Kent County officials. The outcome: Developer Kent Lawrence may develop his 12 lots but they will be hooked up to Chestertown's municipal sewage treatment plant, along with 17 existing failing septic systems.

"It was a double-edged sword. We didn't want the package plant or the development, either. Our thinking was that if we can't stop the development, let's have the waste go to a facility to treat it most efficiently," said Prochaska. "Our position was 'No package plant' and we stopped the package plant."

At a meeting before the Kent County Planning Commission in September, Lawrence said the development would have vegetative buffers, walking trails and that the homes, "reflective of Kent County architecture," will not be seen from the road. Up next: the planning commissioners asked that a traffic analysis be conducted so that they could fully appreciate the impact the development would have on Lovers Lane.

Lawrence, a retired airline pilot, told RIVERKEEPER'S Almanac he would employ environmentally-sensitive



Site of proposed package plant

building practices, consider low-impact designs and maintain a little less than half of the 38-acre property in open space. He also said he has no immediate plans to build as a result of current economic conditions.

In other developments on the advocacy front:

- CRA continues to fight the issuance of a permit from the Maryland Department of the Environment to discharge an average of 450 gallons per day of treated domestic wastewater from a proposed residence on Whale Point Lane near Rock Hall into Bungay Creek. "We don't want a discharge permit issued, that's the bottom line," said CRA Executive Director Bob Parks. "It will have a direct impact on Bungay, which flows into Langford. It will set an adverse precedent." At press time, an administrative hearing judge was considering the matter. If she okays the permit to build the package plant, CRA will appeal to MDE Secretary Shari T. Wilson.
- The protracted controversy over the proposed construction of 1,350 houses in Critical Areas on Kent Island isn't going away.

The good news: The state Board of Public Works in May denied the developer, K. Hovnanian, a wetlands permit. Prochaska had testified about the adverse impacts the Four Seasons project would have on the Chester and some of its tributaries. As he put it: "It's slowed it down. Without a permit, they can't start anything. I think the outcome will be positive." Meanwhile, the project is now tied up in court over growth allocations.

Continued from page 1

"The rationale in the past was solely to remove bacteria for [public] safety," says Beskid. "Now, the focus is changing to include better water quality and saving the bay."

Step-by-Step Process

How does the upgrade process work? First, homeowners are asked to fill out a one-page application. Next, there's an on-site inspection to determine whether the existing system meets the state criteria for funding. Failing systems, for example, aren't eligible. If a grant is awarded, the \$400 inspection cost is waived. County officials then set up the contract with installers. The installation itself, which takes several days, typically has a footprint that involves a hole that's six-by-eleven feet wide and five to six feet deep.

A side benefit of an upgrade is that it could extend the life of existing systems. A BAT BNR has the ability to reduce bacteria, a common cause of clogs in drain fields.

Hicks' best advice for maintaining your system:

- Have your septic tank pumped out every two to five years,

based on the amount of use and size of household.

- Keep water flow to a minimum by installing water-saver features, running washers fully loaded and addressing leaks.
- Do not use a garbage disposal because they add solids that can clog a system.
- Don't plant shrubs or trees over your system. Don't park or drive heavy vehicles over it. Do not allow standing water to collect over it or to drain into it.

"This is another example of how our actions on land affect our river. The reality we face is that systems need to do more than remove bacteria if they are to keep the Chester clean. They need to remove nitrogen as well," says Hicks. "Every system matters, no matter where you live, because all groundwater eventually reaches the river. If enough of us begin to upgrade, we can help bring back the river's health."

For more on the Bay Restoration Fund and CRA's upcoming information session, contact Jennifer Hicks at jhicks@chester-riverassociation.org, or call 410-810-7556.

CRA Names New Planner

Paul Spies, who grew up on a Talbot County farm, joined CRA in October as a conservation planner. He will serve as a liaison between Queen Anne's County farmers and CRA.

Spies, who has an agronomy degree from the University of Maryland, has worked in sales positions for a liquid fertilizer company and, most recently, for Perdue AgriRecycle.

Commenting on his new position, Spies said: "I'm intent on building a rapport between the agricultural community and the association. We both pretty much believe that a healthy farm is the best thing for the Chester River. I'll be calling on a lot of growers, introducing them to CRA and conservation programs. There's no reason for us not to get along with farmers and for farmers not to get along with us."

Spies will work jointly with Virgil Turner, hired a little more than a year ago as CRA's first-ever conservation planner.

MDE Chief Salutes CRA



State environmental chief Shari T. Wilson saluted Chester River Association for its advocacy work recently, saying: "You are showing us across the state how this can be done — and how it can be done well."

Wilson, the keynote speaker at CRA's annual meeting, added: "You've got your own mini-environmental agency when you get right down to it. I've heard [former Riverkeeper] Tony Prochaska's name more often than I can count. Pro-active doesn't even begin to cover it."

Over 100 people attended the June meeting, where Wilson outlined her goals for the Department of the Environment — a renewed focus on enforcement, chief among them.

The agency's challenge can be summed up in two sobering statistics:

- Number of entities facing regulation: 198,000
- Number of inspectors: 132

As Wilson put it, "It's a large ship turning — without enough fuel."

As part of Wilson's game plan, MDE has launched a fiscal study to review what she calls a "patchwork quilt of revenue streams" to figure out where resources should best be allocated.

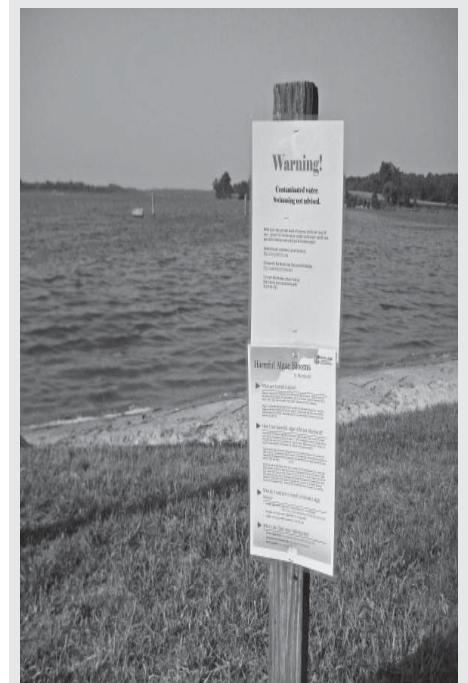
Other initiatives include the implementation of recent legislation on new stormwater guidelines and a project to reduce nitrogen nutrient loads at wastewater treatment plants by almost half. Also, the state has assembled a climate change commission that is working not only to reduce emissions but to adapt to anticipated sea level rises.

Wilson spotlighted growth and development as a pressing issue, noting that drinking water capacity is being tested in parts of the state. In addition, she commented on a "renewed sense of urgency" regarding Chesapeake Bay restoration.

A longtime advocate of the Bay, Wilson posed the question: Are we at risk that people will be too tired to care when the Bay gets another poor report card?

"It's critical to stop and count the successes, and that we do it often," she said, citing the Chester Tester program as a high point. "You are showing the rest of the state how it's done. If we could replicate this statewide, we'd be in pretty darn good shape."

Also at the annual meeting, Kent County farmers Ed and Marian Fry, who operate Fair Hill Farms, were honored with a Riverkeeper award for their model conservation practices.



Several Kent County beaches were flagged with swimmers' advisories over the summer by the county health department as a result of elevated bacteria counts. This photo was taken at Quaker Neck Landing.



New CRA bumper sticker available now!

Upcoming SPECIAL EVENT

Saturday, January 26

Chester Tester Training

CRA Watershed Coordinator Brent Walls is looking for new Chester Tester volunteers! Join him for a Chester Tester Quality Assurance Training session at 9 a.m. at the John S. Toll Science Center at Washington College. Walls is also seeking volunteers for CRA's Science and Technology Committee. To discuss either opportunity, please contact Walls at 410-810-7556.

Parting Thoughts: A Riverkeeper's Farewell

[Editor's note: Former Riverkeeper Tony Prochaska wrote his final column on his last day at Chester River Association, after serving as the watershed's chief advocate for 18 months. We all wish him well.]

As many of you now know, I have accepted a position as an administrator/aquatic ecologist with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Although I am departing, CRA remains in great hands to continue the work that is so crucial for our river and our community.

By implementing CRA's aggressive advocacy plan, developed over the last year and a half, significant progress will continue to be made in addressing the environmental issues plaguing the Chester River and its tributaries. As I have stated before, CRA has gained great momentum that will result in a measurable difference in years to come.

But you must remember that things take time to heal. It has taken many years to impair the Chester River and it will take many years of hard work to reclaim it. Also, never forget our small streams. They hold great value and ultimately will help save the Chester River.

These last 18 months at CRA have been quite challenging and very rewarding. Although I have many fond memories, the best are those working side by side with dedicated folks, from volunteers to paid staff, that believe in this organization and the mission it aims to accomplish.

In my mind, CRA has reached a new level — a level that has fantastic leadership and many talented people who will fulfill CRA's important mission: to advocate for health of the Chester River and the living resources it supports. It has been a pleasure working with all of you to serve the community that we live in.

— Tony Prochaska



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