

Virginia water pollution second worst in nation

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A paddler on the river spotted the partially treated waste water flowing into the Rappahannock River Wednesday morning. Photo courtesy Va. DEQ

Virginia is second-worst in the nation for toxic chemicals dumped into its waterways, according to a report released Thursday.

The report, “Wasting Our Waterways: Industrial Toxic Pollution and the Unfulfilled Promise of the Clean Water Act,” claims 18 million pounds of toxic chemicals are released by industrial facilities into state rivers, lakes and streams annually.

Five Virginia rivers made the report’s list of 50 worst waterways in the nation, while other findings show that more than 377,000 pounds of toxic pollutants were dumped into the Shenandoah River, and 400,000 pounds were released into the Potomac River.

Other Old Dominion waterways listed in the report include the James, Upper James, York, Roanoke and Clinch rivers, Gravelly Run, Sandy Bottom Branch and Western Lower Delmarva.

“Virginia’s waterways are a polluter’s paradise right now,” said Laura Anderson, field organizer with Environment Virginia. “There’s obviously something wrong if polluters are dumping 18 million pounds of toxic pollution into our waterways here in Virginia every year.”

Environment Virginia is “a statewide, citizen-funded environmental group.”

Major findings of the report include:

- 377,090 pounds of toxic pollution were dumped into the Shenandoah River in 2010.
- 203,480 pounds of toxins were released into the Potomac River, and other states dumped additional toxic pollution for a total of 402,261 pounds in the Potomac in 2010.
- Virginia’s Upper Roanoke watershed is ranked second-worst in the nation for highest amount of total toxic discharges, with more than 12 million pounds discharged in 2010.

The report summarizes the release of a variety of chemicals, that cause cancer, birth defects and infertility, and stay in the environment for long periods of time.

The group claims that the most severe result of toxic releases into waterways is the impact on wildlife.

“It’s a huge problem,” said Richard Moncure, a Rappa - hannock River tidal river steward for the Friends of the Rappahannock, who also works with his family’s seafood business.

“It’s been a huge problem for us for a very long time,” he said.

Although it did not make the list as one of the country’s most polluted rivers, the Rappahan - nock River is still suffering the consequences of a PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) contamination in 1972, in which the chemical was released by a Culpeper uniform rental service into Culpeper Sewage Treatment Plant, which subsequently released them into Mountain Run Lake and the Rappahannock River.

“We still pay the price of that today,” said Mike Tippet, executive director of the Friends of the Rappahannock, “with contaminated bottom-dwelling fish and fish consumption advisories all the way to the Chesapeake Bay.”

“One of our main resources for food and business was the local fish,” Moncure said, “but we can’t even eat the fish here because of the PCB’s. Those chemicals just won’t go away.”

A 2010 study included in the report shows that industrial facilities dumped at least 226 million pounds of toxic chemicals — including mercury, arsenic, benzene and lead — into more than 1,400 different waterways across the country, with approximately 2.4

million pounds of those chemicals linked to cancer, developmental disorders and reproductive disorders.