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Severn has extensive dead zone

Riverkeeper: Stormwater, septic projects could help

By [PAMELA WOOD](#), Staff Writer

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2007 was another disappointing year for the health of the Severn River, according to a new report.

The Severn Riverkeeper Program issued its second annual SevernStat report yesterday, which is based on water-quality monitoring data. The report once again showed an extensive oxygen-deprived "dead zone" in the river.



By J. Henson -- The Capital

Severn Riverkeeper Program officials Allison Buckalew and Fred Kelly have a new report detailing the health of the river called SevernStat. The report is based on water quality monitoring and shows the river suffered from a large oxygen-deprived "dead zone" last summer. Ms. Buckalew and Mr. Kelly are shown inside their home office at Mr. Kelly's home on Saltworks Creek.

The summertime dead zone stretched from roughly the middle of the river up into the headwaters, said Allison Buckalew, program director for the riverkeeper program.

"That's a pretty significant portion of the river," she said.

In Round Bay - the broadest and most popular part of the river - the mean level of dissolved oxygen at the bottom of the river was less than 1 mg/liter. Fish, crabs and oysters can't live when oxygen levels dip that low. A healthy oxygen level is 5 mg or greater.

Dead zones occur when excess nutrients flow into the water from sewage plants, farms and stormwater runoff. They foster the growth of algae blooms. When the algae decompose, they suck life-sustaining oxygen from the water.

"Oxygen really is a determining factor for life in the water," said Fred Kelly, the Severn Riverkeeper.

Most of the Severn's creeks were in better shape than the main river, although Asquith Creek near the Rugby Hall and Glen Oban communities also had a problem with low oxygen.

Asquith Creek also was the site of an experiment last summer in which seven "ice eaters" were set up on a pontoon boat that was docked in the creek. The theory was that churning the water would increase oxygen levels.

The creek had a slight improvement in oxygen over last year, but it's not clear whether that was due to the ice eaters, Mr. Kelly said.

Mr. Kelly said the Severn's health could be boosted if the state would fund environmental projects on the Severn, possibly from the new \$50 million Chesapeake Bay 2010 Trust Fund.

State lawmakers created the annual fund with some budgetary maneuvers during their special session last fall. They're on track to approving a competitive grant process for distributing the money.

Mr. Kelly said some of that money should be funneled to stormwater-control projects. Urban and suburban runoff is a major source of nutrient and sediment pollution to the bay and its rivers.

Mr. Kelly also wants to boost participation in a state program that gives grants for homeowners to upgrade their septic systems. Failing septic systems leach pollution into the groundwater and, ultimately, into rivers and the Chesapeake Bay.

The septic upgrade grants are funded by the \$30-per-year "flush fee" that all property owners pay. But few have taken advantage of the program.

The SevernStat report was written primarily by Dr. Pierre Henkart, a volunteer who runs the water-quality monitoring program.

The riverkeeper program named the report in the same style as Gov. Martin O'Malley's BayStat program, which tracks bay restoration projects. The SevernStat report was delivered to the governor's office yesterday.

- No Jumps-

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