
*Gunpowder Riverkeeper Theaux Le Gardeur collects a water sample from the river. He has notified the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that he may sue over what he considers an inadequate Maryland strategy for addressing PCB contamination in locally caught fish. (Dave Harp)*

# PCB cleanup makes uneven progress

## DC prepares to tackle hotspots, but in Gunpowder River little is to be done

**By Timothy B. Wheeler**

It's been a slog, but efforts are making headway to rid the Anacostia River of long-banned toxic chemicals that make it unsafe to eat many locally caught fish.

After years of sampling and studies, District of Columbia officials have proposed tackling 11 hot spots of contamination in the lower Anacostia, which flows through DC before joining the Potomac River. The sediments in those places are laden with PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, a pernicious family of synthetic chemicals still making their way into fish more than four decades after being outlawed because of their risks to human health and wildlife.

"We are making real progress," Tommy Wells, director of the district's Department of Energy and the Environment, said at a cleanup planning meeting in June. The department's "early action" plan, unveiled late last year, calls for a combination of dredging, capping and treatment of the PCB-tainted sediments. The projected $30 million cost is nevertheless only a down payment on dealing with the full mixture of toxic wastes, pesticides and other harmful substances fouling the river.

But officials hope that by addressing these hot spots, they can at least reduce the health risks from eating locally caught fish. After reviewing hundreds of comments on the plan, they intend to announce Sept. 30 how they'll proceed.

"I have to temper my desire to have it all done yesterday," said Jim Foster, president and CEO of the Anacostia Watershed Society. "But it seems as if we are finally on a trajectory to get it done."

Elsewhere, there's far less getting done about the PCB contamination that's widespread throughout the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. In the Gunpowder and Bird rivers north of Baltimore, Maryland regulators have concluded there's little they can do to reduce the PCBs that are responsible for fish consumption advisories there on channel catfish, carp, and white and yellow perch, among other species.

Anglers hoping to eat uncontaminated catch from those two linked rivers may have to wait for PCB levels to decline on their own, state officials said. But it could be a long wait for the persistent chemicals to break down naturally or become buried under cleaner sediment. In the Gunpowder, that could take 49 years, officials project; in the Bird, 93 years.

Theaux Le Gardeur, the Gunpowder Riverkeeper, finds that intolerable. "In many cases, that's three generations of Marylanders subject to fish consumption advisories due to PCBs," he said.

Earlier this year, Le Gardeur notified the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that he intended to sue it for approving what he contends is an inadequate study by the Maryland Department of the Environment of what can be done about PCBs contaminating the rivers. He argues that state officials didn't sample enough and overlooked potential local sources of the chemicals that, if dealt with, could deliver results sooner.

### Still a widespread problem

The Anacostia and pair of Baltimore County rivers illustrate the challenges Bay watershed communities face in dealing with problems posed by PCBs and other toxic contaminants.

While Bay watershed states, localities and federal agencies have focused on reducing water pollution from nutrients and sediment, they've done much less to deal with PCBs, mercury, pesticides, pharmaceuticals and toxic metals in sediment, water and fish.

According to the state-federal Chesapeake Bay Program, 82% of the Bay and tidal waters of its tributaries are considered either fully or partially impaired by toxic contaminants.

In 2014, all six watershed states, the district and the EPA pledged to make the Bay and its rivers "free of effects of toxic contaminants on living resources and human health." They agreed specifically to go after PCBs.

Once widely used as coolants or insulators in electrical equipment and other products, PCBs were banned by the EPA in 1979 amid research linking exposure to cancer and other health effects.

PCB concentrations in water and sediment have declined in many places since then. But PCBs bioaccumulate, meaning that seemingly miniscule doses build up in the fatty tissue of fish when they ingest the chemicals. The contamination is passed up the food chain as predators, including humans, consume tainted fish.

PCBs are the basis for many of the fish consumption advisories in effect throughout the Bay and its tributaries. Anglers are urged to limit or even avoid eating many locally caught fish including, in some places, the highly prized striped bass.

Over the last two decades, the EPA and Bay watershed jurisdictions have developed