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KILLING THE CHESAPEAKE

Raw sewage in the Susquehanna: Pa. 'state government is basically defecating in the river'



FOUND FOUND ON-THE-CHARTS LEVELS OF E. COLI.

Mike Argento, York Daily Record

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This USA Today Network special report explores solutions to deep threats that flow through New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland as the Susquehanna River feeds the Chesapeake Bay — with life and death.

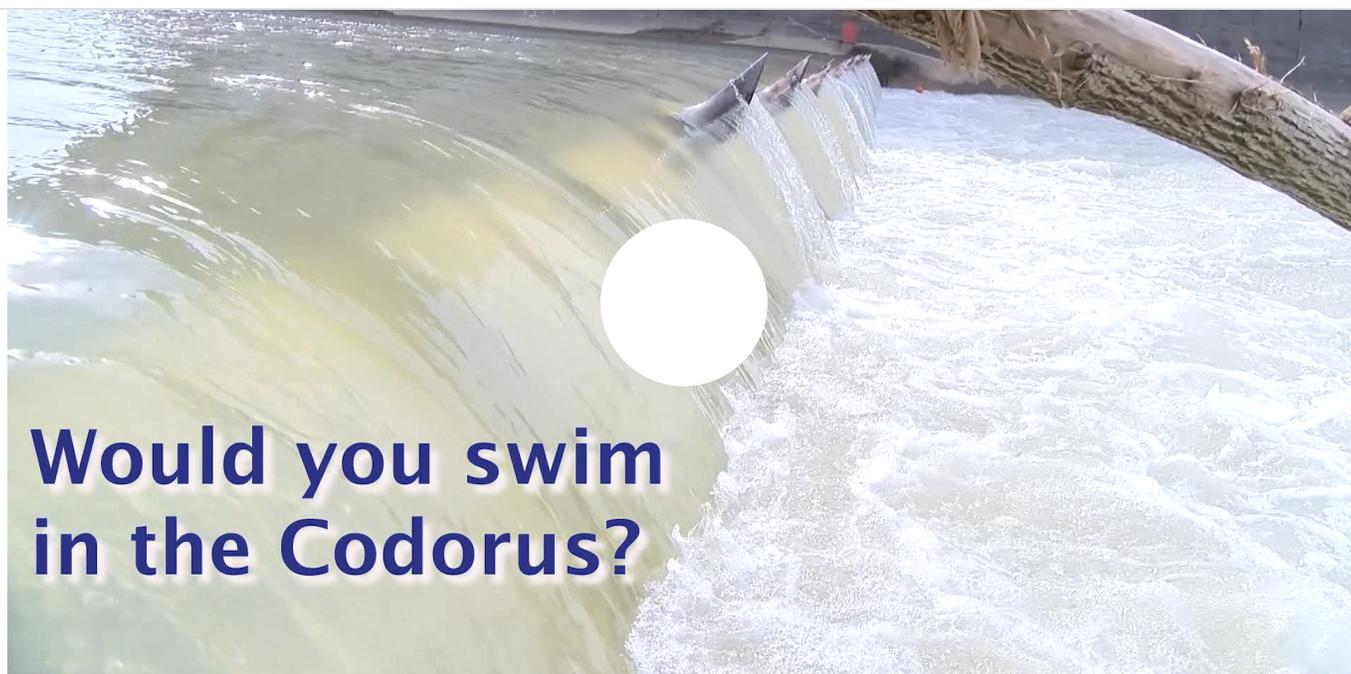
In 2019, Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper Ted Evgeniadis took samples of the water in the river at several points near Harrisburg.

The water quality in that part of the river had been a problem going back decades, caused largely by the antiquated wastewater and stormwater plumbing under the state capital's streets.

When it would rain, the runoff from parking lots and streets and yards would flow into the stormwater system, which was tied to the sewage system. The stormwater would overwhelm the system, causing untreated wastewater to flow into the river, raising levels of biological toxins and bacteria in the water.

The state and the federal government had entered into a partial consent decree five years before, an agreement that required the Harrisburg Capital Region Water Authority to reduce such discharges. But it hadn't been enforced, and the water authority had not been fined for violating its provisions.

Would you swim in or eat a fish from the Codorus Creek? We asked water quality experts. (2:02)



Would you swim in the Codorus?

We asked a local riverkeeper and York City Mayor Michael Helfrich if they would swim, drink or eat a fish from the water of the Codorus Creek.

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By 2019, the governing agencies hadn't tested the water in three years, and at the time had no idea how much harmful bacteria was in the section of the river that flowed in the shadow of the state Capitol's green dome.

Evgeniadis collected samples and sent them off to a lab, which found levels of E. coli bacteria — prevalent in human waste — that “surpassed the testable threshold” for the lab. Some samples had levels of bacteria that were more than 10 times what are considered safe levels.

“When you get back results that are above and beyond what the lab can test for,” the riverkeeper said at the time, “it’s concerning.”

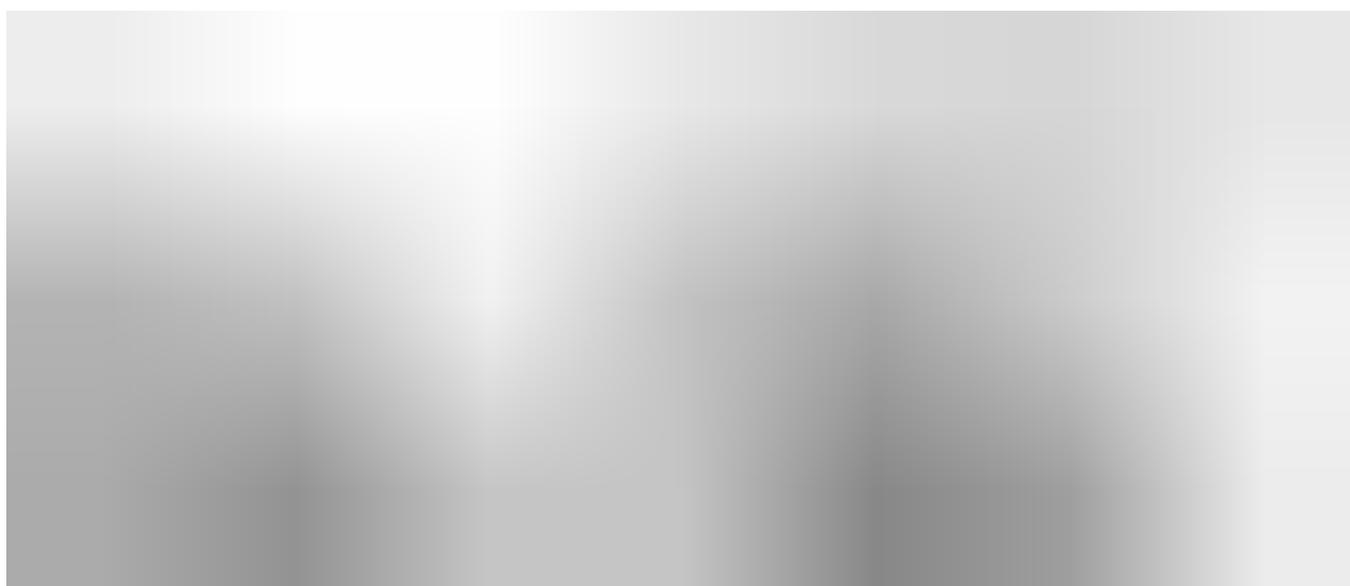
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Other Pa. cities have similar problems

them. For instance, Williamsport, upstream, entered a consent decree in 2010 with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and was fined \$320,000 for violating it, prompting the city to make significant improvements to its wastewater system. Scranton faced a similar dilemma in 2012 and spent \$140 million to upgrade its sewer system. Washington, D.C., and Alexandria, Virginia, undertook projects that reduced their discharges into the Chesapeake watershed by 90 percent.

“The fact that Pennsylvania’s government has not solved such a serious water pollution problem on its own doorstep is an example of how the Keystone State has fallen short on water quality issues,” according to a 2019 report by the Environmental Integrity Project, an organization formed by former EPA attorneys.



This EPA illustration shows how combined sewage and stormwater systems work. On dry days, sewage is piped to a treatment plant (POTW). On rainy days,...

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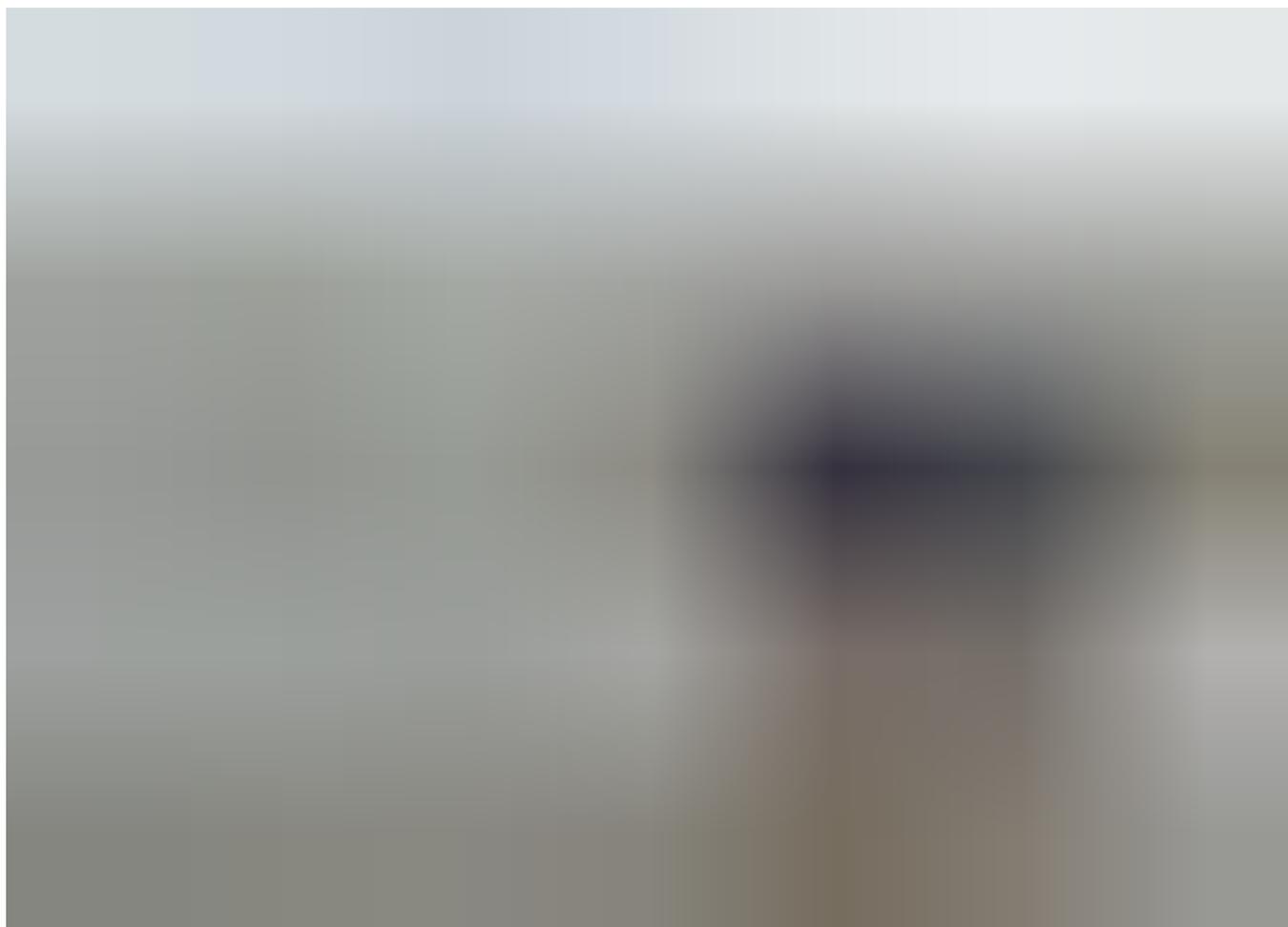


'Our legislators ... are letting it happen'

In August, Evgeniadis provided an update on what his testing revealed about sewage flowing into

While the average of E. coli contamination was down slightly at the three sites he tested, the numbers were significantly increased at the test point just downstream from the governor's residence. It was lower at City Island Beach and at the terminus of a drainpipe at State Street directly in front of the Capitol.

"The governor's mansion, the state Capitol, whoever is utilizing those buildings and whatever waste is being discarded, is ending up in the river," Evgeniadis said in 2019. "It's the same thing for any household or business in the city of Harrisburg, but we point out the governor's mansion and the state Capitol because it's our legislators that are letting it happen."



Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper Ted Evgeniadis is shown taking a water sample at City Island Park beach in Harrisburg. Sampling found levels of fecal bacteria several times higher than would be safe for water contact.

ENVIRONMENTAL INTEGRITY PROJECT

The bottom line was the contamination remained at levels more than two and a half times of those considered safe.

Other cities have dealt with such issues by updating sewage and stormwater drainage systems. One of the most effective systems, which has been adopted in other cities, is building a massive underground holding tank that stores wastewater and stormwater until the flow recedes to the point that that water can be treated before being discharged, according to the Environmental Integrity Project. Such a project worked in Washington, reducing the amount of sewage flowing into the watershed by 90 percent.

But those projects are expensive — and money, as always, is an issue.

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COVID-19 pandemic pinches state funding

Capital Region Water, which operates the greater Harrisburg area's water system and infrastructure, is proposing to charge Harrisburg area ratepayers \$315 million over 20 years to improve the maintenance of the existing combined sewage and stormwater system and make some enhancements to it — such as upgrading a sewage pumping station, in addition to planting trees, building rain gardens and creating other “green infrastructure” projects in an attempt to absorb stormwater.

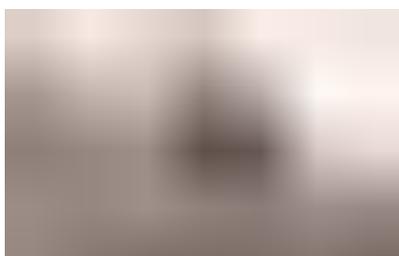
The water authority projects that these efforts could reduce the amount of raw sewage mixed with stormwater pouring into the river by perhaps 60 percent, but not stop it.

“We fully acknowledge the challenges we have with water quality and aging infrastructure,” Capital Region Water spokeswoman Tanya Dierolf said. “We’re also looking to do what’s most advantageous to the city itself as far as being affordable to residents. But we are moving forward with a plan and potential solution.”

[Sewage Overflows in Pennsylvania's Capital](#) by [Scott Fisher](#) on Scribd

The Environmental Integrity Project doesn't believe that's enough and argues that, as owners of 40 percent of the real estate in Harrisburg, the state government needs to take action.

"The state government should step up, man up and pay up," the organization's communications director, Tom Pelton, said recently. "State government is basically defecating in the river and it should have some responsibility to clean it up."



He's pulled 10,000 pieces of plastic from the Susquehanna – and he's just getting started

That may be unlikely, though, since the state is facing massive budget shortfalls caused by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pelton said his organization is looking to the new administration in Washington to address the problem by passing stimulus spending to pay for large infrastructure projects.

“It’s an environmental issue,” he said, “but it’s also an economic issue. Infrastructure projects would create jobs, from engineering firms to construction workers.”

Evgeniadis has said, “No one is saying this is 100% the state’s responsibility. But the state does have to play a role as a financial partner to correct the problem. This is the capital of our state we’re talking about, and the Susquehanna River runs right through it. Putting a Band-Aid over it isn’t enough.”

Former York Daily Record reporter John Buffone contributed to this report.

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