Chesapeake Bay ecosystem health remains poor, but slightly improved in 2007

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An independent scientific analysis led by University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science researchers gives the Chesapeake Bay a C-minus in 2007, indicating that Bay ecological conditions were slightly better than the previous year, but far below what is needed for a healthy Bay.

“The Chesapeake Bay Health Report Card shows conditions slightly improved last year, but there is nothing here from which we can take great comfort,” said University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science researcher and project leader Bill Dennison. “Data gathered from more than 150 monitoring sites throughout the Bay show us that the health of the Bay remains poor. We are not on the road to recovery.”

Scientists note that the increase from a D-plus in 2006 to a C-minus in 2007 was highlighted by improved conditions in Maryland’s Upper Western Shore (including the Gunpowder and Bush Rivers) and the Choptank River on the Eastern Shore. However, they also warn that those improvements may in part be due to the summer drought.

“The summer drought most certainly played a role in last year’s health,” said Dennison. “We had record low rainfall in many regions, which led to less nutrient and sediment pollution flowing into the Bay during the critical June to September timeframe.”

The report card also allows scientists to compare conditions in various parts of the Bay over a number of years. This analysis provides insight

into several important trends:

-- Overall, the annual amount of pollution reaching the Bay in 2007 was similar to average conditions observed over the last 17 years.

-- While scientists are optimistic about the resurgence of aquatic grasses in the Upper Bay, they remain concerned over recent losses in key nursery areas in the Lower Chesapeake.

-- Despite slightly clearer Bay waters in 2007, scientists remain concerned about the downward trajectory Bay water clarity has taken in many areas over past years. Cloudier waters hamper aquatic grasses and other life from thriving.

“These long term trends are disturbing. At best, we are only holding our own against population growth and development taking place throughout the Bay watershed,” added Dennison.

“The scientifically-rigorous report card reinforces the notion that conditions across the bay vary from creek to creek and river to river,” said University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science President Donald F. Boesch. “These local variations are a clarion call to Bay managers that targeting pollution reduction programs is critical to accelerating improvements in Bay health.”

Source: University of Maryland