

# From grass to water, Chesapeake Bay experts differ on meaning of 'clean'

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After a recent rain, Baltimore's Inner Harbor is clogged with an eclectic combination of garbage -- soda bottles and a large purple ball, sticks and dirt, candy wrappers and a hollowed-out television.

"The bay right now has more dead water than it ever has -- and that's from the waterman's experience not from a scientific viewpoint," said Larry Simms, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association.

For more than 30 years, the [Chesapeake Bay](#) states -- Maryland, Virginia and Delaware -- have worked under voluntary agreements to promote the health of the bay.

With President Barack Obama's Chesapeake Bay executive order that mandates the government come up with a plan to clean up the bay and the Environmental Protection Agency's vows to step up its role in the process, cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay is still a hot topic in both local and national politics.

Yet experts agree the bay's cleanliness is sorely lacking, and many use different standards to determine cleanliness -- or lack thereof.

Beth McGee, a senior water quality scientist at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, said that two important elements of a clean bay would be increased dissolved oxygen content (lack of dead zones) and clearer water, so that submerged aquatic grasses, "the meadows of the bay," would be able to grow and shelter aquatic life.

"It's where you'd be able to go out in shallow water and see your toes instead of murkiness," McGee said. "That's what a restored bay is, you know? Clear water."

Frank Dawson, assistant secretary for aquatic resources at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, said controlling nutrient input is the most important element to cleaning the bay.

"A cleaned-up Chesapeake Bay is a system that is in balance, as in there aren't too many nutrients, there isn't too much sediment entering the bay. It's one in which we have restored habitats from oyster reefs to submerged aquatic vegetation (or) bay grasses -- where there are an abundance of wetlands...along the shorelines," Dawson said.

Tommy Landers, a policy advocate for the environmental advocacy organization Environment Maryland said a clean bay would be one that Marylanders and Virginians could be proud of.

"A clean bay will have water that everybody can swim in, anywhere in the bay, without any threat of getting sick -- where anybody can fish in and be confident that they can bring up crabs and oysters and fish, that they can be confident are not diseased," he said.

When John Smith traveled the bay 400 years ago, he wrote that oysters, "lay as thick as stones," and that sturgeon were plentiful -- "more than could be devoured by dog or man."

"I don't think we'll ever return to how pristine the bay was a couple hundred years ago," said Maryland Democratic Sen. Ben Cardin. "That's not our goal. The goal is to have a bay that is healthy to use for recreation. A bay that is healthy to our species, including our favorites like the rockfish and the blue crab."

McGee said she is hopeful recent bay cleanup efforts will achieve those goals.

"It's an exciting time right now in bay restoration ... There's a lot of complementary things that are going on right now," she said, referring to the executive order, as well as related bills, and efforts by the EPA.

Cardin is circulating a bill for discussion that would make the Chesapeake Bay executive order into law. He plans to introduce the bill in October. Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Baltimore, plans to introduce a companion bill in the House, also in October.

"I happen to agree with President Obama that the Chesapeake Bay is a national treasure and it needs to be treated as such," Cardin said, referencing language in the executive order.

One of the concerns leading Cardin to introduce the bill is that the executive order could be changed when the administration changes.

Dawson, of the DNR, agreed that cleaning up the bay would take time -- certainly more than four or even eight years.

"It took a significant amount of time to get the bay to where it is today," he said. "It's not going to be fixed overnight."

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