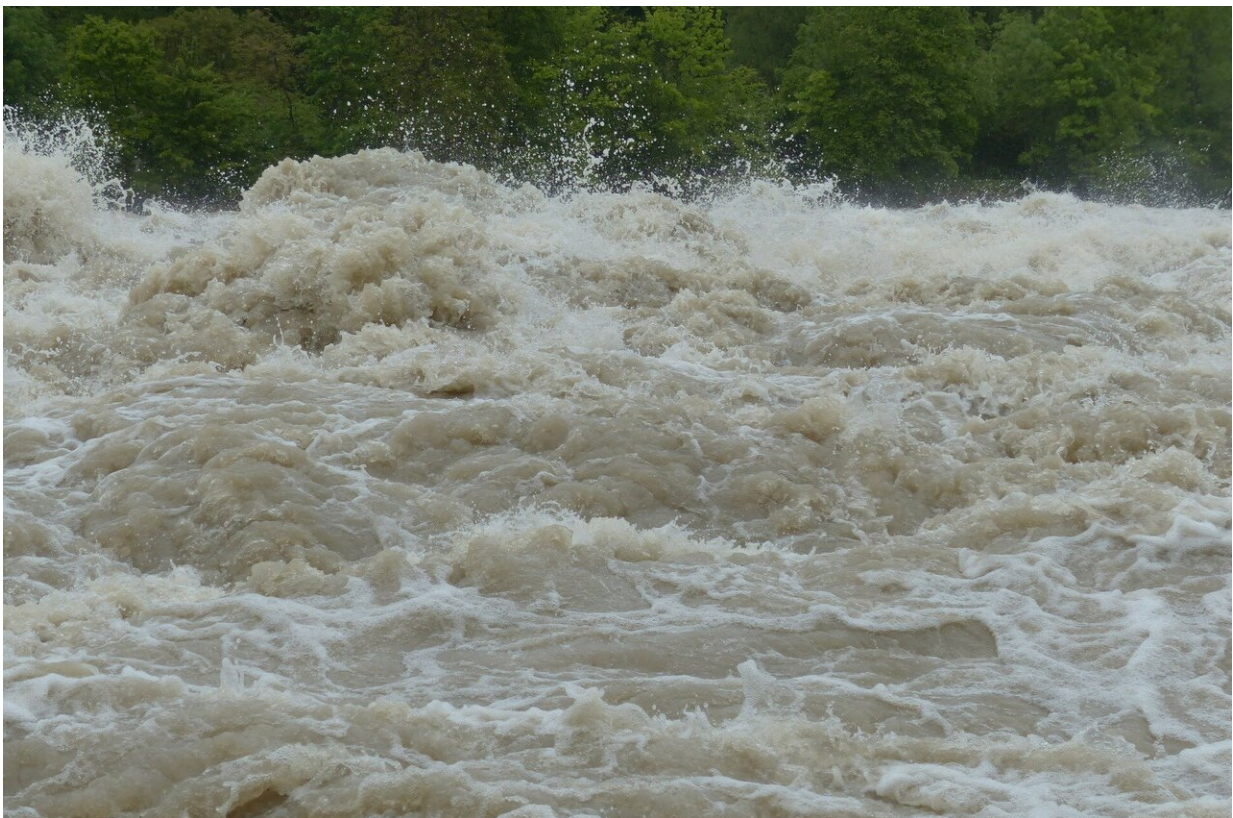


Maryland's Back River is unsafe for any human contact, environment officials declare amid wastewater plant problems

April 25 2022, by Scott Dance



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The Back River in Baltimore County is unsafe for drinking, swimming or any human contact, Maryland environmental officials declared Friday

amid ongoing concerns about failing systems at the Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant in Dundalk.

Anyone who touches the water is advised to wash with soap and water as soon as possible, and to seek [medical advice](#) if water comes in contact with any open wounds.

The declaration comes after environmental groups have raised concern for months that unsafe bacteria levels are present in the river frequently, and that the public should be notified of the risks when boating or recreating on the river.

The Back River plant, which is owned by the city of Baltimore and processes sewage and wastewater from across the city and much of Baltimore County, has not been properly maintained, state inspectors and [environmental groups](#) say. It is failing to properly filter bacteria and pollution before releasing water into the river, they say.

The Maryland Department of the Environment ordered a state takeover of the Back River plant last month as inspections showed water treatment problems were getting worse. But department officials had said that what observers have said recently appeared to be untreated sewage floating in the river were actually floating mats of algae.

Regardless of that question, analysis of water samples taken Tuesday show unsafe levels of fecal bacteria in multiple locations on the river, the department said Friday.

"The health advisory is a necessary and protective step in our broader effort to stabilize the situation and dramatically improve the operation and maintenance of Baltimore's world-class wastewater asset," Maryland Environment Secretary Ben Grumbles said in a statement.

Blue Water Baltimore, a [water quality monitoring](#) and [advocacy group](#) that has been raising concerns about the Back River plant, praised the state for issuing the advisory. The group routinely tests for bacteria and pollutants at 49 sites in waterways around the Baltimore area, and its monitoring first showed signs of problems at both the Back River plant and the Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant in Baltimore's Wagners Point last August.

"This is why water quality monitoring is so important—thanks to the data, we know the Back River is often unsafe for human contact; we are relieved that the state issued an advisory to protect the many people who recreate in the Back River," said Alice Volpitta, the organization's Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper.

The 9-mile Back River drains Northeast Baltimore via Herring Run and part of eastern Baltimore County via Northeast Creek, which means it also handles a lot of storm runoff. Hart Miller Island, a popular recreation spot and boating destination, lies just off its mouth in the Chesapeake Bay.

Signs posted at Cox's Point Park in Essex, a public park across the river from the wastewater treatment plant, warned visitors Friday to minimize contact with waters, especially when waters are cloudy, saying the pollution is linked to "recent heavy rains, storms or other conditions." Such signs are often posted around waterways because heavy rain washes surges of wastewater from overflowing sewer systems into streams and rivers.

But in the Back River's case, that signage may give people the impression that the [water](#) is safe if it looks clear or if it hasn't rained recently, said Angela Haren, senior attorney at Chesapeake Legal Alliance, which is representing Blue Water Baltimore in a lawsuit against Baltimore over the wastewater plant failures.

She said the signs should make clear, in multiple languages, that the health threat is more persistent and severe than that.

"This is 100% of the time right now; not just in heavy rain," she said.

Haren added that such signs and public notifications also are needed around the Baltimore harbor, where boating and other recreation are common, and so are unsafe bacteria levels.

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