



Oil, grease and pesticides are just a few of the pollutants that an environmental group says are carried in the water of Rock Creek along Connecticut Avenue in Chevy Chase. The creek was one of 10 that comprises a list of Montgomery County's most polluted streams.

- Andrew Harnik/Examiner

Report: Montgomery drinking water under threat of pollution

Environmental group compiles list of county's top 10 most polluted streams

Organization hopes release will strengthen upcoming clean water regulations

By Dena Levitz
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Stormwater runoff is only the start of the severe problems with Montgomery County streams that environmentalists say threaten the safety of local drinking water and recreation.

To illustrate just how polluted waterways have become, a group of citizens and environmental agencies called the Stormwater Partners Coalition just released a top 10 list of the filthiest streams across the county.

In doing so, Steve Dryden, with Friends of Rock Creek's Environment, says the coalition wants to stress the need to add some teeth to the new Clean Water Act permit that state officials are in the midst

of drafting this summer for Montgomery County.

"The two previous permits were designed to measure the pollution and try to better understand what's causing it," he noted. "It's really time to set the bar higher and work to reduce the pollution."

The most polluted streams, which are not ranked, are: Cabin John Creek, Little Falls, Little Paint Branch, Little Seneca Creek, Muddy Branch, Northwest Branch, Rock Creek at the lower watershed, Rock Run, Sligo Creek and Watts Branch.

Dryden said the coalition compiled this lineup by examining local and county reports on water quality over the past 15 years as well as using members' own observations about the county's more than 1,500 miles of streams.

What they noticed in growing amounts was the harmful presence of fertilizers, pesticides, oil, grease and even raw sewage. Increased construction in Montgomery County also has brought with it influxes of dirty water.

"Clarksburg has been a huge problem because mud is running off of the construction site, and the streams have been harmed by the muddy water," Dryden said. "And a lot of this water that gets mud-

dy goes into the drinking water. ... That's why this should concern everybody. The water is not as safe as you might think."

The Stormwater Partners Coalition's visions for the Clean Water Act permit include putting caps on the allowable amount of pollutants in the streams and limiting development near high quality streams.

So far, the Montgomery County Council has taken notice. Council members are set to consider a resolution of support for the group's efforts at today's meeting.

County spokeswoman Donna Bigler said an Examiner reporter could not speak with anyone at the Department of Environmental Protection on Monday but released a statement emphasizing the county's efforts to improve stream water quality over the years.

"While Montgomery County has made healthy streams a top priority, its partners at the state and federal levels have not. As a result, we have been hindered in our ability to make even greater progress," the statement said. "We look forward to working with the Stormwater Coalition and anyone who is committed to improving the health of our waterways and the Chesapeake Bay."

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DIRTY WATER

Notes on each of 10 most polluted streams, from the Stormwater Partners Coalition:

Cabin John Creek — raw sewage leaks, including 600,000 gallons released in aftermath of June storms, impaired for bacteria/nutrients/sediment/biological quality

Little Falls — huge volumes of runoff, fair to poor habitat

Little Paint Branch — more than half the stream network is rated poor or fair; large volume of poorly controlled stormwater

Little Seneca Creek — steep declines in biological quality, construction is causing serious sediment and erosion problems

Muddy Branch — declines in biological quality, development has resulted in increased stormwater pollution

Northwest Branch — two-thirds of the tributaries have been classified as poor or fair by the county

Rock Creek — large areas of runoff, all of the streams in the lower watershed are listed as poor or fair by the county

Rock Run — three main subwatersheds are listed as being of low biological quality

Sligo Creek — though it's undergone restoration still rated as having poor water quality

Watts Branch — development has contributed to its decline