The Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant. **FILE**

21M gallons of partially treated wastewater in Patapsco prompt advisory

By Matt Hubbard

The Anne Arundel County Department of Health issued an advisory against direct contact with the Patapsco River after 21 million gallons of partially treated wastewater overflowed into the waterway, impacting the headwaters of the river to Bodkin Creek.

Health officials said the overflow came from the Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant in Baltimore City after a structural issue led to the bypass of nitrogen-reducing equipment. Officials said the wastewater did not meet the standard for discharge but confirmed that raw sewage did not enter the waterway.

The overflow was initially reported to the Anne Arundel County Department of Health at 11 p.m. Thursday and was listed as ongoing, health department officials said. Baltimore City Department of Public Works officials told Anne Arundel County's health department that the plant had been fully operational at 6 p.m. Thursday.

The Anne Arundel Department of Health issued the advisory Friday against direct water contact for seven days due to the risk of wastewater affecting Anne Arundel County recreational waters.

Typically after rainfall, Anne Arundel County beaches are under an advisory against swimming and other direct-water contact for at least 48 hours due to the risk of high bacteria levels. However, the overflow added additional days to the advisory.

The seven-day notice advised anyone who comes in contact with the affected water to "immediately wash well with soap and warm water."

"Anyone fishing in the Patapsco River and neighboring waterways should be cautious and consider wearing gloves, and if there is any water contact, wash your hands with soap and warm water as soon as possible," the advisory reads.

People can sign up for water quality email notifications about closings and advisories by visiting the Anne Arundel County Department of Health's alert page on its website.

Built in 1940, the Patapsco facility is situated on 69 acres and removes pollutants from wastewater before it is emitted back into the river through enhanced nutrient removal, chlorination and de-chlorination methods.

The plant has a capacity of 63 million gallons per day and serves about 450,000 people across nearly 184 square miles from Baltimore City to Baltimore, Howard and Anne Arundel counties.

Baltimore has had issues in the past with treatment plants emitting pollutants into neighboring water ways from both the Patapsco River Wastewater Treatment Plant and the nearby Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant.

In 2022, the state found the Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant, located in Dundalk, had "failures at nearly every level" stemming mostly from infrastructure issues that caused solid waste to build up in various parts of the sewage treatment process, leading to excessive releases of harmful bacteria and nutrients. The following year, Baltimore City paid up to $4.75 million in state fines for wastewater pollution — ranking among the largest fines for water pollution in state history — after it was discovered that the two plants were emitting severe pollutants.

The fees are used to fund environmental projects, with a focus on the Patapsco and Back rivers, as well as meet a series of deadlines for state-mandated repairs.

Under the court-enforceable agreement — called a consent decree — the city was also obligated to share more information publicly about the plants and place warning signs at the plants' discharge pipes.

Have a news tip? Contact Matt Hubbard at mhubbard@baltsun.com, 443-651-0101 or @mthubb on X.