YOUR TURN

The Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant. **STAFF FILE**

Patapsco River water quality faces wastewater woes

Which do you check first in the morning: the local news or your local water advisory? For many Marylanders who enjoy spending time on the Patapsco River, it's the latter.

Despite major improvements to Baltimore's Patapsco River Wastewater Treatment Plant, accidents like last week's 21-million-gallon wastewater overflow undermine significant progress at the site ("21M gallons of partially treated wastewater in Patapsco prompt advisory," June 2). It's swimmers, anglers and wildlife who pay the price.

While authorities ruled out immediate health risks for people, the bacteria and excess nutrients in partially treated wastewater can still pose a threat to fish, underwater grasses and the Chesapeake Bay. More intense rainfall from climate change, combined with aging, leaky sewage pipes means that, without significant investment, future overflows are more likely.

Now is a critical time to address these growing threats. Both the Patapsco and Back River facilities — Baltimore's two largest wastewater plants — are seeking discharge permit renewals from the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), with a public comment period open for the Patapsco River plant permit through June 20. For Baltimore and Anne Arundel residents who enjoy recreating in their local waterways, now is the opportunity to be heard on this issue.

Investments made in the Patapsco River's water quality have put it on the course for a cleaner, healthier future. Think of how far we've come. Otter and dolphin sightings have become a regular occurrence in the Baltimore Harbor. A large oyster sanctuary reef is thriving and expanding in the Patapsco despite stacked odds against it.

The Back and Patapsco River plants are deeply in debt to the river, with a long history of pollution violations. MDE has made strides to bring both facilities into compliance, with improved maintenance, staffing and treatment equipment. However, incidents like last week's overflow demonstrate that continued oversight and investment is essential for a healthy river and community.

We urge MDE to uphold strong permit standards for these plants, to monitor and address issues when they arise, and plan for future climate change scenarios that will further stress the system's infrastructure. We also encourage local residents who enjoy the Patapsco's bounties to speak up on this issue for a healthier future. More information on the permit renewal processes and public comment instructions can be found here for the Back River plant and here for the Patapsco River plant.

— Gussie Maguire, Annapolis

The letter writer is a Maryland staff scientist for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.