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Federal help for restoring Patapsco pledged

Baltimore chosen as part of nationwide urban waters effort

By Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun

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Obama administration officials converged Friday on Baltimore to announce a new initiative to clean up and redevelop blighted urban watersheds — with the ailing Patapsco River one of seven waterways chosen nationwide to test a partnership between federal agencies and local communities.

"Urban waters across our nation are brimming with potential," Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson said at a news conference in Middle Branch Park, as rowers and fishing boats plied the waters behind her. "We can revitalize these areas," she added, saying the initiative sought to return the waterways to the community centerpieces they once were.

Eleven federal agencies, including the EPA and the departments of the Interior, Agriculture and Housing and Urban Development, have agreed to work with local governments and nonprofit groups to reduce pollution and enhance urban neighborhoods with trees, parks and jobs.

The Patapsco was chosen because its condition typifies that of so many urban waterways, officials said. Among the least healthy of the Chesapeake Bay's tributaries, the river is littered with trash and is unfit to swim in, while anglers are warned against eating certain fish because the river bottom is contaminated with toxic wastes.

Waterfront businesses and community groups are working to make the river swimmable and fishable by the end of the decade.

"You've picked the right place here in the Patapsco," Maryland Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin told the

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visiting federal officials. "It's a vulnerable watershed, but the commitment is here to make a difference."

Besides the Patapsco, the other urban waterways chosen for help with pilot projects are the Anacostia River in Washington and its Maryland suburbs, the Bronx and Harlem rivers in New York, the South Platte River in Denver, the Los Angeles River in California, the Lake Pontchartrain area in New Orleans, and an area of northwest Indiana bordering Lake Michigan.

No new funding is attached to the effort, but officials say they intend to make better use of existing money by getting agencies to work together better. Michael Rains of the U.S. Forest Service said his agency — which has had a field station in Baltimore for nearly 20 years — figures it might be able to come up with \$500,000 to spend on projects in the Patapsco watershed, such as planting trees and restoring eroded stream banks.

Jackson said the EPA might be able to help Baltimore save money by adjusting federal regulations to encourage less costly ways of reducing storm-water pollution from city streets and parking lots.

The federal agencies aim to work with the city to develop a plan for connecting and improving natural areas such as forests and streams with parks, trails, community gardens and urban farms. They also intend to help plant trees and restore schoolyards, as well as offer environmental education and career training for youths.

Local environmental activists welcomed the pledge of federal help. But they also expressed impatience.

"Let's not make this a bureaucratic, paper-chasing thing," said Halle Van der Gaag, deputy director of Blue Water Baltimore, the harbor watershed watchdog group. "Let's focus on implementation and getting something done."

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