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[News](#)
[Local](#)
[Local Stories](#)

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Flushing toilets could add to Anacostia toxins

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[Paul D. Shinkman](#), wtop.com

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WASHINGTON -- The poor state of the Anacostia River is not a new phenomenon, but local residents might not know they could contribute to the water's toxins every time they flush a toilet during a storm.

Sewage and rainwater containing trash and toxins flow into the Anacostia River through portals like this one, if water pipes flowing to the processing plants exceed their capacity. (WTOP/Paul D. Shinkman)

A new report gives failing grades to the state of the river's water quality from its mouth at the Potomac River up to its crossing into Maryland. The Anacostia Riverkeeper and Anacostia Watershed Society's appraisal says local government policies to prevent toxins from seeping into the water are either poor or "unknown."

The report also predicts that at current rates, it could take 4,000 years to improve the river's water clarity -- essential for the health of aquatic grasses, which anchor the ecosystem.

"It's going to take time, it's going to take money, and it's going to take changes on everybody's part," said Dottie Yunger, the Anacostia riverkeeper.

"If we continue doing things the way we are doing them, we will never be able to get enough sediment and pollution and trash out of the river for the river to be clear enough."

The stormwater that captures trash is the most "glaring" issue because it is so evident in the river, Yunger said. She recounts incidents of great blue herons walking across piles of trash in the water wide and deep enough to support the large birds' weight.

But toxins and the stormwater itself are also serious issues that affect plants, animals and fish, which Yunger said some residents still catch and eat.

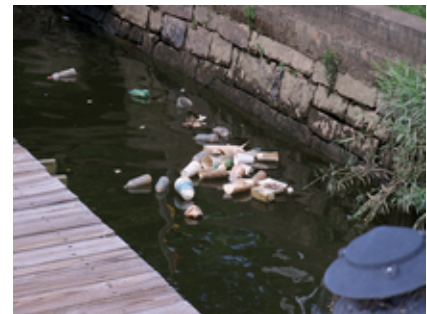
"It makes people not want to use the Anacostia River," she said.

There is some good news in the report. D.C. gets a "thumbs up" for its overall plan for river improvement, and its efforts to stem the stream of trash flowing into it. The 5-cent tax on plastic bags in the District has already greatly reduced the amount of garbage in the water, Yunger said.

But there is still a lot of work the District needs to do, along with the other jurisdictions that border the river: Montgomery and Prince George's counties, the state of Maryland and the federal government, Yunger said.

"The District if Columbia could start doing everything right tomorrow to start cleaning up the Anacostia River "

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Yunger said new Environmental Protection Agency legislation would establish a "trash diet" for the river, setting a certain amount of trash that is legally allowed.

Organizations that contribute to exceeding the legal limit are subject to "thousands of dollars a day" in fines, Yunger said.

Enforcement of existing laws is also essential, she said, such as the 1972 Clean Water Act, which established the water quality standards used in her organization's report.

But much of the responsibility falls on local citizens, said Yunger, pointing to initiatives like the District's tax, which encourages shoppers to bring their own reusable bags.

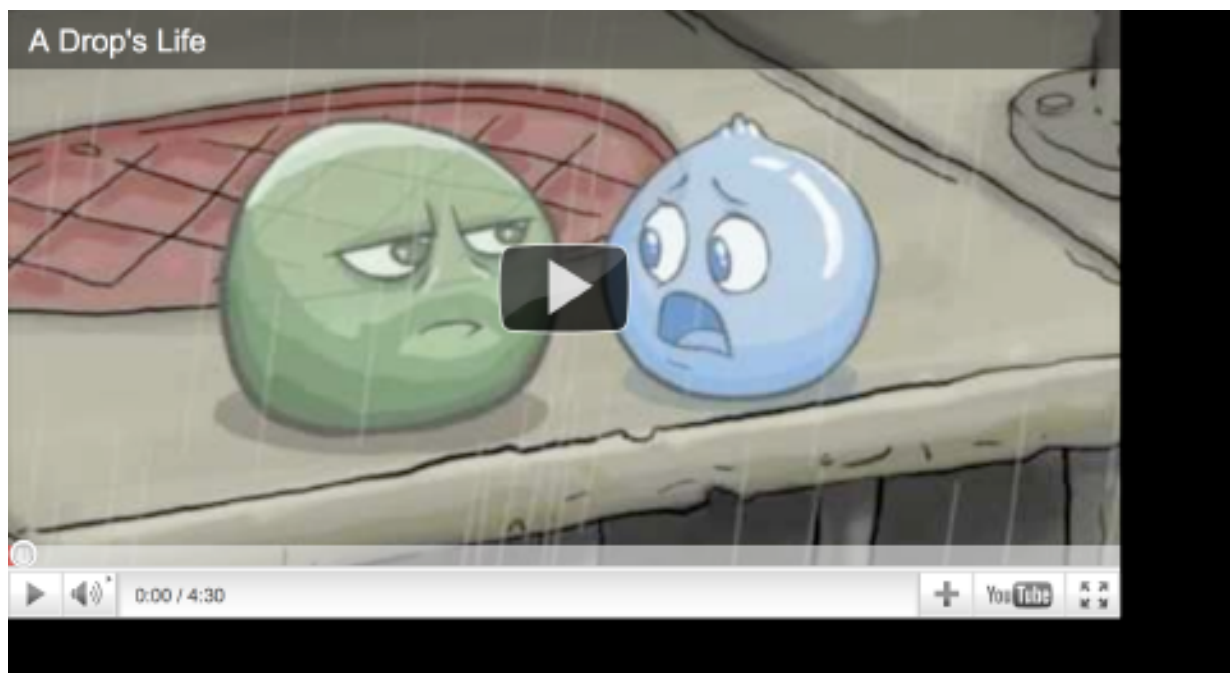
"There really is a tremendous amount of power into taking that bag to the grocery store," she said.

Public awareness can also help conservation efforts.

Older parts of the District have underground pipes that contain both sewage and rainwater. If that combined water is too much for treatment plants to keep up, the city initiates a Combined-Sewer Overflow, shutting off the flow and redirecting the raw sewage and trash accumulated from runoff into local bodies of water like the Anacostia River, according to DC Water spokesman Alan Heymann.

Rainfall greater than a quarter-inch can be enough for a CSO in some parts of the city, such as the area near RFK Stadium.

This cartoon from D.C. Water and Sewage Authority outlines the process:



This kind of problem is not unique to D.C., and the government has a 25-year, \$2.6 billion plan to reduce CSOs by 96 percent, said Heymann, as a part of the [Clean Rivers Project](#).

Yunger points to simple solutions, like installing a rain barrel for home gutters, to help keep water from flushing toxins into local rivers.

"One person doing one small thing has a cumulative effect," she said.

To learn more about efforts to clean up the Anacostia and how you can help, visit the websites for [DC Water](#),

[Anacostia Riverkeeper](#) and [Anacostia Watershed Society](#).

WTOP's Michelle Basch contributed to this report.

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