



DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT ENVIROMATTERS

November 4, 2010

Making a Big Splash for Clean Water

It is the largest facility of its type in the world, and the wastewater that it treats eventually reaches the Chesapeake Bay. Upgrades have already resulted in improvements to water quality. Now, upgrades that will make an even bigger difference in water quality are on the way.

We are, of course, talking about the Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant on the banks of the Potomac River in Washington. If you've ever driven by it on I-295, you've seen how massive this facility is. Blue Plains treats the waste from over two million customers from 725 square miles of Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. Inside, the operations center might give NASA's Mission Control a run for its money. The Plant can treat 370 million gallons a day on average and more than a billion gallons a day when rain increases the flow.

With numbers like that, it's probably no surprise that Blue Plains is the largest piped discharger of nutrient pollution to the Bay. That's why it is good news that the Environmental Protection Agency's [renewed permit](#) for the facility outlines a firm schedule for reducing the pollutants discharged.



According to EPA, the permit requires the amount of nitrogen the plant can discharge to be reduced by 3.8 million pounds a year -- a 45 percent reduction. And it establishes a timeline for plant modifications to be completed by July 2014 so limits can be fully achieved by 2015.

Nitrogen is the most serious pollutant in the Bay. As a nutrient, it promotes algae growth, which eventually leads to a loss of the dissolved oxygen needed by aquatic life. In Maryland, we have more than doubled our efforts to reduce nitrogen as part of our ambitious two-year Bay restoration milestones. We know that when we reduce nutrient pollution our waterways and the Bay will bounce back.

Blue Plains is operated by the District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority (DC Water). I recently went to the facility to join their terrific staff, EPA, the District's Department of Environment, and Montgomery County to mark the strengthening of the permit requirements. The upgrade of the Plant is an enormous construction project. In addition to the ENR upgrade, the District is also required to eliminate discharge points from its existing Combined Sewer Overflow system through the "Long Term Control Plan."

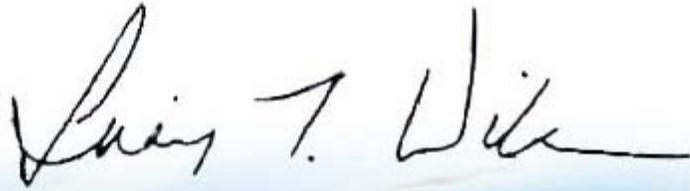
Why does the project have so many parties following it and advocating for it? A regional approach is needed to make sure a project of this magnitude can succeed. Maryland's [draft Watershed Implementation Plan](#) outlines strategies to reduce pollution from all sectors in all areas of the State. In Maryland, we have upgraded 16 of the state's 66 largest wastewater treatment plants. Another 15 upgrade projects are under construction. This builds upon our progress in reducing nutrient pollution. Since 1985, Maryland has reduced nitrogen pollution by a third and phosphorus by an even greater percentage -- even as the population has grown by 29 percent.

A recent report showed that the Potomac River is beginning to show signs of dramatic improvement. The River is, the report found, the cleanest it has been in four decades. This is

thanks in part to previous upgrades at Blue Plains.

We all know this is not enough. More must be done.

But the major step being taken at Blue Plains -- along with the hard work to develop a comprehensive plan to reduce water pollution in Maryland, our neighboring states, and the District of Columbia -- signals that the restoration of the Bay is finally within sight.



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