FAQs: Potomac Interceptor Sewer Overflow

What caused the sewage spill?

DC Water, who owns the Potomac Interceptor - the very large sewage pipe which broke - is still investigating, but it appears debris, including large rocks, blocked sewage from flowing through the pipe, built up pressure, and caused a break at a weak point above the blockage.

Has the sewage spill been stopped?

Mostly. By January 24, DC Water was able to divert most of the sewage flowing through the Interceptor through a bypass and put it back into the pipe downstream of the break. However, some small further overflows have occurred due to temporary pump blockages and other issues. At this time, authorities believe that the spill is almost entirely contained. However, until more permanent repairs are completed, there is a heightened risk for a further overflow incident.

Who owns and operates the sewer line?

The Potomac Interceptor is owned, operated, and maintained by D.C. Water, which receives oversight directly from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Maryland does not own or regulate the pipe.

Who is responsible for stopping the spill and repairing the infrastructure?

Even though the portion of the pipe that broke is in Maryland, DC Water owns and operates the Potomac Interceptor, and it is regulated and overseen by the federal government, specifically the U.S. EPA. DC Water has been in the lead to stop the overflow, and along with EPA will be responsible for developing the plans to repair and restore both the infrastructure and the impacted surrounding environment.
Other regulatory agencies, like the Maryland Department of the Environment, will play a key role in enforcing state and federal laws regarding impacts to Maryland waters. Maryland's role is to protect Maryland waters and public health through monitoring, coordination, and regulatory oversight where applicable.

How dangerous is the water in the Potomac right now?

The latest data - as recently as February 12, 2026 - indicates that downstream from the spill [where?] levels of bacteria like e.coli are at “non-detect” levels, meaning that the latest data indicates they are not present at levels that pose a risk to people or wildlife.
DC Water, the Maryland Department of the Environment, and other organizations like the University of Maryland and Potomac Riverkeeper, have been conducting regular water sampling for a variety of bacteria since the spill began. Early on, while large flows of raw sewage were still spilling into the Potomac, the levels of bacteria like e.coli were very high. However, further downstream, those levels were much more diluted even during the active phase of the spill.

What do the health advisories from Maryland and DC mean?

Within days of the spill, Maryland’s Department of Health, with nearby counties, issued cautionary advisories urging people to avoid direct contact with the river around and downstream from the spill, or on the lands between the pipe break and where it flowed into the Potomac. DC’s Department of Energy and Environment issued a similar advisory on February 13.
These advisories caution residents to avoid swimming in or coming into direct contact with waters that are nearby or may smell foul, and provide information on what to do if such contact does occur.

Is it safe to drink water from my tap in the area?

Yes. There have been no impacts to drinking water systems in Maryland. The break was located downstream of active drinking water intakes**.**

Can Maryland take separate enforcement actions?

Maryland can take enforcement action for impacts that occur in Maryland waters, consistent with state law. MDE is evaluating enforcement and recovery options based on: The extent of impacts in Maryland, Applicable statutory authority, EPA’s response and in Coordination with federal regulators and D.C. authorities. MDE’s focus has been — and remains — protecting public health, monitoring environmental impacts, and ensuring accountability.