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STORMWATER – a Growing Threat to the St. Mary's River

Stormwater runoff is a significant source of pollutants entering our waterways—including the St. Mary's River. According to the EPA's Chesapeake Bay Program, runoff from developments in the Bay watershed is responsible for about 16 percent of the phosphorus, 11 percent of the nitrogen, and nine percent of the sediment polluting the bay. These nitrogen percentages may be higher for the St. Mary's River since there is only one small sewerage treatment plant in the watershed—at the Navy's St. Inigoes installation.

Nutrient pollution feeds algal blooms, which create the dead zone that afflicts the tidal St. Mary's River. This dead zone, indicated by oxygen-depleted waters, is found in the deeper waters from Tippity Witchity Island south to the confluence with the Potomac River.

Runoff from parking lots, as well as other hard surfaces, picks up residues fallen from vehicles, including worn tire particles and other toxic chemicals. Residential yards and commercial landscapes also provide chemical-laden runoff from fertilizer and pesticide applications. The loss of natural filters further compounds the problems caused by runoff. Development and construction not only reduce the natural filters, they also alter the natural hydrology of an area causing flooding, stream bank erosion, and habitat degradation throughout the watershed.

Preventing pollution is far simpler and cheaper than addressing this problem once it has begun. According to Maryland's Tributary Strategy, cleaning up our existing stormwater runoff problems will cost the state over \$6 billion. Establishing innovative strategies and stricter standards for stormwater runoff from construction and development sites can prevent these problems before they happen.

The Maryland Stormwater Management Act

In spring of 2007, the legislature passed the Stormwater Management Act, which can be expected to drastically change how developers plan for and handle polluted runoff from new developments. The Act, which was signed into law by Governor O'Malley on April 24th, requires:

- Environmental site design must be the first approach to managing runoff from a site.
- Groundwater recharge after development must be the same as before the land was disturbed.



Silt entering the Pembroke Run – Dec 11, 2004

- Local governments must update their planning and zoning codes to allow for environmental site design practices.
- The Department of the Environment must adopt a comprehensive policy for permitting construction and post-development runoff.
- MDE must also recommend a fee schedule necessary to adequately enforce the state's stormwater laws.

Next Steps: Drafting Strong Regulations

In Maryland, the Department of the Environment sets minimum standards for stormwater runoff, which the local jurisdictions – both counties and cities – must then adopt. The counties and cities then issue permits to developers that require those minimum standards be met.

Currently MDE is soliciting input from county agencies on draft regulations they are proposing to implement the requirements of the Stormwater Management Act. It is imperative that those



regulations are as strong as possible to ensure that the intent of the law is realized—a revolutionary approach to planning for polluted runoff.

By addressing stormwater runoff in a comprehensive manner and decreasing the amount of runoff created by development, Maryland can be a leader in stormwater management and can take significant steps to restoring the health of the St. Mary's River and the Chesapeake Bay.

Strong stormwater regulations can protect rivers like the St. Mary's both for our sake and for the creatures that rely on them.

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Or visit MDE's web site at:
<http://www.mde.state.md.us/Programs/WaterPrograms/SedimentandStormwater/swm2007.asp>