



Sassafras Update

Sassafras River Association
PO Box 333
Georgetown, MD 21930

October 2008

The Susquehanna River and the Conowingo Dam

At the Sassafras River Association's October meeting, Lower Susquehanna **RIVERKEEPER®** Michael

bottom dwelling aquatic life that supports the Bay's food chain.

Riding with that sediment is 2600 tons of phosphorus, one of the primary nutrient pollutants of the Bay and a major issue in our own watershed—and the principal cause of our algae blooms.



Helfrich gave us a virtual tour of his River and explained how important it is to Chesapeake Bay — and Sassafras River — ecology.

Almost half of the Bay's water comes from the Susquehanna. Along with that water comes sediment — almost a million tons of it each year — which blocks sunlight for underwater grasses and smothers the

Compare that 2600 tons — some of which probably reaches our River — with the 7 tons of phosphorus that experts tell us the Sassafras can handle each year. (Not to mention our own contribution!)

We all disparage the Conowingo Dam and the debris it pours into our River with big storms. We should actually appreciate

the Dam, which **traps** 70% of the sediment (and 40% of the phosphorus) that would otherwise flow into the Bay.

Michael describes the dam as “Katrinawingo” and “one of the biggest problems we know about that we’re doing nothing about.” Here’s the problem: the area behind the Conowingo is almost full; it’s only going to be able to trap sediments for about 10 more years (at best). After that, all that sediment will come directly into the Bay.

Of equal concern are big storm events, when sediments are scoured from the Riverbed and emptied into the Bay. The floods of January 1996 poured 9.1 million tons of sediment from the Conowingo into the Bay — more than 9 times the annual load! There were similar huge events in 1972 and 1975. Scientists tell us that

it took the Bay 15 years to recover from the 1972 Hurricane Agnes floods.

What’s to be done? There are no inexpensive or easy solutions. For the longer term the **RIVERKEEPER** is exploring a proposal to dredge specific areas that are known to shed sediments and to use the dredge materials for construction.

Michael and our own **RIVERKEEPER**, Kascie Herron, shown together at left, are designing a study to assess the Susquehanna’s contribution to phosphorus in the Sassafras.

In the near term, Michael will be meeting with the owners and operators of Conowingo Dam around the first of the year. The operators, he says, claim that they are unaware of the effects that dam operations (e.g., “opening the gates”) have downstream.

Michael wants to carry your concerns to the operators. Please provide Michael with your personal photos and written testimony about the effects of Susquehanna debris on the Sassafras:

Lower Susquehanna **RIVERKEEPER®**
Michael Helfrich
324 West Market Street
York, PA 17401 or
riverkeeper@lowersusquehannaiverkeeper.org

November 11— New “Path Forward” for Water Testing

On November 11 at the Granary at 7 p.m. we’ll hear from Science Committee co-chairs Janet Rühl and Ted Carski about the “Sassafras Samplers” results for 2008.

Then we’ll turn to the Committee’s great plans for expanding our water quality testing program — includ-

ing moving into the River’s non-tidal areas — during 2009.

The plans are ambitious and will require an expansion of our great volunteer corps.

Come learn about the program and how you can participate. There will be formal training in early 2009.

Contact the **RIVERKEEPER**

The **RIVERKEEPER**’s telephone number is (410) 708-3303 and her email address is riverkeeper@sassafrasriver.org.

Watershed residents and visitors with concerns about the River or specific issues are encouraged to call her. **Turn the page for Kascie’s latest news!**



RIVERKEEPER'S®

Corner

Big news this month on the enforcement front. Responding to a citizen's call, I went to inspect a questionable construction site that was well underway. After observing from the road and then by water, I informed the County Zoning inspector. With no knowledge of an approved permit at the site, he went to investigate the following morning.

That afternoon he informed me that the property owner did NOT have a permit and due to this and the lack of erosion and sediment control at the site, a very large fine would be imposed. The fine will be accumulated daily for the length of the operation. The Inspector issued a "stop work order" to the individual, and required that immediate erosion and sediment control measures be put in place -- primarily silt fences.

Unfortunately, much of the damage had already been done, but my hope is that others will learn from this situation and be sure to acquire the appropriate permits and establish the necessary controls in order to protect the River – before starting a project.

I also hope that more people see that they can make a difference just by calling, and encourage others to inform either myself or the County Planning and Zoning Office if any questionable activity is observed. Many people

may not have otherwise known that such an operation was illegal, so it never hurts to ask and educate ourselves and others for the sake of the Sassafras.

Earlier this month, I took a ride on the "Honey Dipper," the West/Rhode RIVERKEEPER'S free pump out boat. It has come to my attention, with regards to overwhelming calls all summer about boat sewage dumping, that we need to take care of this problem from a different angle. DNR police are understaffed and cannot enforce when we need them. Therefore, I am proposing that we look into a free pump out service for Sassafras River boaters. This has proven very successful on the West and Rhode Rivers and we may want to consider something similar.

The Science Committee and dedicated Sassafras Samplers volunteers met for a discussion of where the sampling program has been and where we are going and I am very excited to announce our path forward to the rest of the membership at next month's meeting. We will be expanding quite a bit, and more volunteers will be needed. So if you've been thinking of volunteering and water quality testing is of interest to you, please come to the November monthly meeting to find out more.

I attended the Chesapeake Watershed Forum in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, where I focused on watershed assessment, stream corridor assessment and report card development. This was very helpful in understanding and organizing the action strategy I am working on for the Sassafras. Many people are very experienced in this area and have offered their support and expertise to me if I should need it. I have rethought the scope of this project and intend to have an outline of this plan by next week. Stay tuned for developments on the Sassafras Watershed Action Plan (SWAP) – "SWAP Dirty Water for Clean." Isn't that cute?

The meeting with Michael Helfrich, the Lower Susquehanna RIVERKEEPER went very well and I thank everyone who attended. I hope that many of you seriously consider writing a testimony of your personal experiences and observations of the effects that Conowingo Dam operations have had on the Sassafras River.

Thank you, as always, for your support, and please remember to keep your eyes and ears open. I'm only a phone call away!

See you on the Sass

Kascie Herron

Sassafras RIVERKEEPER