



Potomac River FAQ

Q. How is healthy is the Potomac River's water quality? Is it safe?

The Potomac River is in the middle of a remarkable comeback and is much cleaner compared to decades ago. Today, it's common to see bald eagles, fish, and other wildlife thriving along the river and crowds of people visiting its shorelines and enjoying water activities.

In Potomac Conservancy's latest Report Card, we graded the Potomac River a "B," an improvement from a "B-" grade three years prior – and a dramatic reversal from a dismal "D" in 2011. (*Learn more at www.potomacreportcard.org*)

There's been great progress to clean up our "Nation's River," but pollution remains a problem. The Potomac's health is improving, but it's not yet safe for swimming and fishing. In fact, it's *illegal* to swim and consume fish in the waters surrounding Washington, DC due to public safety concerns.

Until the Potomac River is safe enough for us to eat its fish and swim in its waters without risking our health, Potomac Conservancy's job isn't done.

Q. What makes the Potomac River unsafe for public swimming and fishing?

Due to public health concerns, it is currently *illegal* to swim in the Potomac River and eat its fish in and around Washington, DC.

Studies are being conducted to assess whether lifting DC's swimming ban will be possible in the next two to three years. If that happens, however, the river will *still* be off-limits during and after wet weather because stormwater runoff causes pollution to spike to dangerous levels.

Pollutants that are harming local waters include:

- Toxins and excess nutrients from fertilizers, pesticides, and street oils
- Silt and sediment from erosion
- E. Coli from diluted sewage overflows
- Bacteria from algal blooms
- PCBs and legacy pollutants from now-banned industrial applications
- Trash and plastics from litter and illegal dumping

Learn more:

- Banned from the water: the history of swimming in the Potomac River - [link](#)

- 9 local swimming holes to explore this summer - [link](#)
- Summer hot topic: Is it safe to swim in the Potomac River? - [link](#)

Q. What causes pollution in the Potomac River?

The Potomac River is only as healthy as the land that surrounds it. Everything that happens on the land impacts the water flowing in our streams and the Potomac River. There are many ways land-generated pollution enters our waterways.

Thanks to decades of progress following the 1972 US Clean Water Act, industrial pollution, wastewater effluence, and agricultural runoff – all common sources of pollution – are in steady decline.

Polluted runoff from developed areas is the *only* growing source of pollution to the Potomac River. Polluted runoff occurs when excess rainwater flows across paved and hardened surfaces and carries street oils, lawn fertilizers, trash, and even diluted sewage directly into local streams.

Q. Can I get sick from touching the Potomac River?

While many do not give it a second thought, others wonder about the safety and cleanliness of the water in the Potomac River and its tributaries. Bacteria are the main concern for direct water contact recreation (such as swimming, wading, and water skiing). While bacteria are integral parts of any natural system, some types in sufficient number, can cause gastrointestinal or respiratory illnesses or skin and ear infections.

Here are ways to limit your risk when recreating in or near the Potomac:

- Limit touching the water for several days after a significant rainstorm. Storm flows spike bacteria levels. Bacteria levels typically decrease with time following a storm.
- Do not swallow river water.
- Do not enter the water if you have cuts or open sores.
- Avoid algae blooms (brightly colored water) and trash in the water.

To learn more about current conditions and potential health risks from swimming, please visit:

<https://www.potomacriver.org/potomac-basin-facts/is-it-safe-to-swim/>

Q. What are the biggest challenges to cleaning up the Potomac River?

Restoring swimmable and fishable waters to the Potomac River is an ongoing fight – and one that is getting harder.

Rapid forest loss in the Potomac River region is happening at an alarming rate and directly contributing to increasing polluted runoff. Worse still, streamside trees receive a D+ in this report signaling the region's failure to meet its planting goals. Forested lands stabilize stream banks, absorb rainwater, and filter polluted runoff. Forests quite literally *tree-t* our water.

The climate crisis is intensifying storms and lengthening droughts in our region — extreme conditions that weaken nature's defenses and increase polluted runoff. Rising river levels, hotter stream temperatures, and changing seasons are putting further strains on the local ecosystem.

Learn more at www.PotomacClimateReport.org.

Q. What is a combined sewer overflow event?

Nearly all major US cities rely on old sewage systems with pipes and tunnels that can combine raw sewage when heavy storms exceed the system's capacity to manage excess rainwater. In these cases, the combined stormwater and raw sewage flow directly into a stream or river until the flow decreases with the end of the storm event.

There are several of the older combined sewage systems in the Potomac watershed, including parts of Washington, DC and Alexandria, VA. Most of these jurisdictions are now engaged in building solutions that will almost entirely prevent sewage overflows in the future.

Learn more about [DC Water's Clean Rivers project](#) and [tunnel construction](#) underneath the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers.

Q. What will it take to restore the Potomac River? Is there any hope?

Our community is so close to enjoying a swimmable, fishable Potomac River – but we must act now to make this future a reality.

Help [Potomac Conservancy](#) reforest our communities and *tree-t* our streams. Together, we'll stop polluted runoff from destroying our hometown river, drinking water sources, and wildlife habitat.

Join our local movement of 35,000 supporters who are taking action for clean water!

- Protect riverside forests
- Restore trees and wildlife habitat
- Pass water protection laws
- Remove harmful litter from local streams
- Invest in nature-first defenses to climate impacts
- Build river-friendly communities

Take action at www.potomac.org!

Q. How can I help clean up the Potomac River?

Our community deserves clean water. The Potomac is the country's wildest urban river and the life force of our region. Five million people depend on the river for drinking water and rely on it for outdoor enjoyment.

It's time we enjoyed a swimmable, fishable Potomac River.

Q. What is Potomac Conservancy's mission?

Potomac Conservancy is a nationally accredited land trust and clean water nonprofit in the Potomac River region. We're committed to restoring the Potomac to full health for the five million people who rely on the river for drinking water and outdoor enjoyment. We improve local water quality through land conservation initiatives that effectively stop pollution from entering our streams and tributaries. Our impassioned base of 35,000 supporters empowers us to protect and expand streamside forests, pass water protection laws, and restore local shorelines.

Learn more at www.potomac.org.