

May 11, 2009

To the Editor:

On behalf of the St. Mary's River Watershed Association, I'd like to thank Maryland Attorney General Doug Gansler and his staff for their recent visit to St. Mary's County to conduct a "River Audit" for the St. Mary's River.

Attorney General Gansler has made it a priority of his time in office to identify problems contributing to the continued degradation of the Chesapeake Bay and her tributaries and to then take action to remedy them. The St. Mary's River audit was the fifth in a series of such events.

Doug's day in the county was well spent listening to input from locally elected officials, experts on the St. Mary's River from St. Mary's College, and environmental leaders from county agencies and civic groups. The day ended with an informative town hall meeting where community members voiced their concerns. Doug and his staff got a chance to see the St. Mary's River first hand on a tour of the river aboard the skipjack The Dee of St. Mary's.

While we are pleased that the condition of the St. Mary's River is "better than most Bay tributaries", unfortunately the comparison is only relative. Indeed, the health of the St. Mary's River has been designated "degraded" by the Environmental Protection Agency, as required under section 303(d) and 305(b) of the Clean Water Act. This is far from encouraging.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources, via the index of biological integrity, has identified just six short segments, or about 10 ½ miles of the non-tidal St. Mary's River's and its tributaries, as "high quality." Another 14 miles of segments is rated "poor quality." Most of the stream miles fall in between high quality and poor quality. Revealing is the trend over the past ten years, 2000-2009; generally, our St. Mary's River tributaries are becoming more degraded over time, and, as we may expect, the streams closest to Rte. 235 are suffering the most from the negative impacts of poorly designed land development.

As we all know St. Mary's County is the second fastest growing jurisdiction in Maryland, and that will most likely remain the case for the foreseeable future. With growth comes many opportunities, but many challenges as well. Much of the St. Mary's River and her tributaries flow directly through the Lexington Park Development District, where we are directing the majority of our future growth. Without the proper safeguards in place to guide this development, the future health of the St. Mary's River is in significant jeopardy.

However, the good news is that we can really do much to assure that the St. Mary's River is degraded no further, and is in fact restored in quality to the time when she was one of the leading oyster hatcheries in the Chesapeake.



Remember that the St. Mary's River is the only river system in the state of Maryland that is located entirely within one jurisdiction – St. Mary's County - and her future truly does lie in our hands. One of the most beautiful and historic rivers in the country, along whose banks was founded St. Mary's City, the fourth permanent settlement in English America, the St. Mary's is not only a great symbol of our county, it is truly Maryland's river as well.

We can do nothing else but to assure her future, in honor of the generations of Marylanders who have enjoyed her beauty and bounty for thousands of years, and for the benefit of the many people who will continue to join us here in the Land of Pleasant Living.

Joe Anderson
President, St. Mary's River Watershed Association