

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15

This timeline represents the history of water quality in the Potomac basin.

1600s:

In 1608, Captain John Smith describes the Potomac as "... beavers, martens,

frequented by otters,



and sables. Neither better fish, more plenty, nor more variety for small fish had any of us ever seen in a place."

1700s:

Some of the Potomac's first shad and striped bass fisheries are established by George Washington. Active fisheries also include herring.

1800s:

1810 - First sewer system in Washington constructed to convey wastes to nearest stream.

1830s - It was "not uncommon to pull 4,000 shad or 300,000 herring in one seine haul. One haul of 450 rockfish with as average weight of sixty pounds was documented. Hundreds of sturgeon were captured on a single night near the US Arsenal in Washington" (Niles Weekly Register).

1870 - Washington area population was 75,000.

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15

1894 - USPHS reported "... at certain times of the year the river is so loaded with sediments as to be unfit for bathing as well as for drinking and cooking purposes. It contains fecal bacilli at all times ..."

1898 -First biological survey of Potomac was conducted.

early 1900s:



1905 - USGS reports turbidity in the Potomac: "3000 ppm during floods, 15-20 during low flow, >1000 ppm 18 days/year, 300-1000 ppm 43 days/year, 50-300 ppm 123 days/year, <50 ppm 181 days/year."

1911 - Fishery surveys of upper Potomac and tributaries from 1898-1911 find 84 species of fish.

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15

1914 - District of Columbia (DC) sewer system carries wastes from 340,000 people to the Potomac. USPHS study of pollution in the Potomac finds river in "generally good condition" with "ample oxygen".

1916 - Potomac Estuary survey notes that submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) covers the Potomac, except for the central channel, along both banks. Various reports indicate that extensive beds of SAV were the "natural" condition of the Potomac in the nineteenth century.

1930 - Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC, Prince George's and Montgomery counties) connects its sewer system to DC's.

1932 - Untreated wastes from Metro area population of 575,000 into Potomac. Bacterial contamination forces closing river for swimming from Three Sisters Island to Fort Washington. Low DO levels between Geisboro Point and Fort Foote endanger fishery.

1938 - Blue Plains waste water treatment plant (WWTP) is completed, with a capacity of 130 million gallons per day (mgd) - primary treatment.

1940s:



1940 - Congress gives its consent to the states

of Maryland (MD) and West Virginia

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15

(WV), the commonwealths of Pennsylvania (PA) and Virginia (VA), and the District of Columbia to enter into a Compact providing for the creation of the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin (ICPRB) and the Potomac Valley Conservancy District.

1943 - The Commission publishes its first report on the condition of basin waters.

1945 - ICPRB adopts a pollution abatement program, and publishes the first edition of its News Letter. Pennsylvania passes the nation's first law that puts limits on acid mine drainage pollution to streams.

1946 - ICPRB defines a set of "Minimum Water Quality Criteria" by which means Potomac streams and waterways may be judged suitable or unsuitable for several principal water uses. VA creates a State Water Control Board. The PA State Chamber of Commerce forms a Stream Pollution Abatement Committee, and the state begins the planning phase of sewerage construction. ICPRB completes an intensive survey of industrial pollution.

1947 - MD's Water Pollution Control Commission is created.

1948 - The Congress enacts the first Federal Water Pollution Control Act. ICPRB initiates a continuous water-quality sampling program in the basin. Industrial wastes have made the Shenandoah River below Front Royal a "biological desert."

1949 - Conditions on the Shenandoah have "radically" improved since a year ago; credit is given ICPRB for its coordination with local authorities. The WV Board of Health is created with responsibilities for sewage disposal.

1950s:

1950 - Twenty Soil Conservation Districts have been established to cover 98 percent of the Potomac watershed.

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15

1951 - Low dissolved oxygen levels kill thousands of fish during the summer. The Washington Post calls the Potomac River "an open sewer."

1953 - The Federal Water Pollution Control Act is extended.

1954 - ICPRB issues a major report describing the polluted Washington area Potomac and publishes the results of a study it sponsored on North Branch industrial wastes. The regional WWTP concept is instituted with the signing of an agreement between DC and the WSSC.

1955 - Congress directs the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) to study the North Branch. WRC-TV (Washington, DC) telecasts the first installment of the "Our Beautiful Potomac" series, which reveals the Potomac's poor condition.

1956 - Wastes from raw and partially treated sewage of Washington, DC's population is double that of 1932. Federal legislation is passed that extends and strengthens the Water Pollution Control Act. The new Alexandria, VA, waste water treatment plant goes into operation, and is heralded as "the only ... plant ever built in the Washington metropolitan area that has been adequate at the time of its completion..." The Rock Creek Watershed Association is organized. Under the auspices of the ICPRB, a group of citizens organizes the Citizens Council for a Clean Potomac.

1957 - The U.S. Public Health Service declares the Potomac River unsafe for swimming. The first Potomac Enforcement Conference is called. The first waste water treatment plant on the North Branch is completed in Cumberland, MD. ICPRB estimates that on the average, 60 million cubic feet of sediment is deposited annually within the metropolitan Washington reach of the Potomac estuary. The first National Water Quality Sampling Station is put into operation on the Potomac at Great Falls.

1958 - The (1957-58) Potomac Federal Enforcement Conference sets goals,

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15

among them secondary treatment for Potomac treatment plants. MD and VA sign the Potomac River Compact of 1958, and establish the Potomac River Fisheries Commission. ICPRB is now gathering and tabulating information from about 85 stream sampling stations operated by cooperating agencies, municipalities and industries.

1959 - ICPRB publishes its first "Potomac River Water Quality Network;" it holds a "first-of-its-kind" silt control conference and sponsors a study of sediment sources in the basin with US Geological Survey (USGS). DC and Fairfax County, VA, sign an agreement for Blue Plains to treat a part of the county's wastes. Secondary treatment is added at Blue Plains.

1960s:



1960 - The Metropolitan Washington Regional Sanitary Advisory Board is established. Work begins on a plan to separate DC's combined sanitary and stormwater sewers. The Upper Potomac River Commission treatment plant in Westernport, MD, begins operation; it is designed to clean up pollution in the North Branch Potomac.

1961 - DC installs the first fully automatic stream sampling and recording device on the Potomac.

1962 - The Potomac River Fisheries Commission begins operations. A comprehensive metro Washington area sewage disposal report is issued.

1963 - ICPRB issues two reports on sediment sources and an urban sediment control

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15

program. The ACE publishes a comprehensive plan of development for the Potomac, which calls for 16 major dams.

1964 - The Potomac Interceptor, tying northern Fairfax County and parts of Loudon County, VA, and Montgomery County, MD, to the DC Blue Plains plant, is christened with its first sewage flows.

1965 - The governors of the basin states and the president of the DC Council establish a Potomac River Basin Advisory Committee to coordinate views on matters affecting the watershed. The Water Quality Act of 1965 passes, establishing a Federal Water Pollution Control Agency and requiring water quality standards. In his State of the Union address, President Lyndon Baines Johnson said, "We will seek legal power to prevent pollution of our air and water before it happens. We will step up our effort to control harmful wastes, giving first priority to the cleanup of our most contaminated rivers. We will increase research to learn much more about the control of pollution. We hope to make the Potomac a model of beauty here in the Capital, and preserve unspoiled stretches of some of our waterways with a Wild Rivers bill."

1966 - The Federal Inter-Departmental Task Force on the Potomac issues its report to the President. It proposes the Potomac National River and makes recommendations. The Clean Water Restoration Act passes, increasing grants for research, state programs, and construction of waste water treatment plants. VA undertakes the task of defining its river basins and planning water resource development and management. PA begins long-range sewerage planning.

1968 - Chlorination of the Washington area waste water treatment plant effluent begins. DC engages a firm to study Blue Plains development. The ACE issues a new report: six (instead of 16) major reservoirs are proposed.

1969 - The earlier Enforcement Conference goals have not been met: the river is described as "a severe threat to the health of anyone coming into contact with it." A new Enforcement Conference is called, mandating the degree of treatment, capacity for growth, and regional commitments. The Mason Neck Wildlife Refuge is established.

1970s:

1970 - ICPRB's Compact is amended, extending its authority to include water supply and water-related



land use. DC passes erosion control legislation. MD enacts a sediment control law, installs the Maryland Environmental Service, creates the Wetlands Act of 1970, and imposes a ban on sewer extensions affecting the five drainage basins under the jurisdiction of the WSSC. VA sets up a state construction grant program, imposes a moratorium on new sewer hookups in Fairfax County, and approves a Potomac-Shenandoah water resources plan. Metropolitan Washington local jurisdictions sign a Memorandum of Understanding, agreeing to expand Blue Plains to 309 million gallons per day and allocating additional capacity and local share of costs. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is established.

1971 - The DC Council prohibits water contact sports in the Potomac, Rock Creek, and the Anacostia River. Urban sediment is a major concern.

1972 - The Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments (Clean Water Act, or CWA) are passed by Congress, establishing a national goal of "swimmable-fishable" waters. PA passes a sediment control law.

1973 - This summer, fewer algae blooms arrive later. A suit is initiated in Federal District Court by the Virginia State Water Control Board against WSSC for overloading the Blue Plains plant. VA's Erosion and Sediment Control Law is passed.

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15

1974 - A Blue Plains agreement allocates flows and sludge disposal responsibilities; a trial program of phosphorus removal begins.

1975 - An ICPRB conference focuses on rising dollar and energy costs associated with DC metro area sewage treatment. Congress authorizes a five-year study of the Chesapeake Bay.

1976 - Pleasure boaters rediscover the Potomac; largemouth bass reappear in Washington, DC. There is a noticeable lack of blue-green algae mats that had covered the upper estuary a decade earlier.

1977 - The Federal Surface Mining Control & Reclamation Act is passed. Blue Plains advanced secondary treatment expansion is operational. Mercury is discovered in sediments and fish in the Shenandoah River. CWA is revised to strengthen control on toxic pollutants and to allow states to assume more regulatory responsibilities.

1978 - The first annual Potomac Raft Race is held. A full-time fishing guide begins working the Potomac. The USGS begins annual submerged aquatic vegetation surveys. The Low Flow Allocation Agreement is signed by ACE, MD, VA, DC, WSSC, and Fairfax County; it is the first significant example of multi-level co-operation for water resource management in the Washington area.

1979 - River improvements result in an interest in permitting some contact sports in the metro Washington Potomac once again.

1980s:

1980 - Secondary treatment is achieved at all local waste water treatment plants. Some fish are caught

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15



1990s:

1991- AWRC adopts Six-Point Action Plan for the restoration of the Anacostia River.



1992 - 1992 is declared by President Bush as the "Year of Clean Water". Chesapeake Bay Program sets nutrient reduction goals for Potomac and other bay tributaries.

1993 - Oil pipeline ruptured and spilled over 400,000 gallons of diesel fuel into Sugarland Run, a Northern Virginia tributary to the Potomac. Anacostia River designated by American Rivers as fourth most endangered river in North America. Chesapeake Bay Program designates Anacostia as "Region of Concern" for chemical contaminants. USGS conducted Potomac basin-wide sampling for chemical

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15

contaminants as part of National Water Quality Assessment (NAWQA) program. MD, WV and ICPRB sign cooperative agreement on program to restore water quality to the North Branch.

1995 - Survey by USGS reveals that SAV have grown in some areas of the Potomac and declined in others.

1996 - ACE, MD, and WV begin study to evaluate measures for restoring North Branch. DC issues its Anacostia River Toxics Management Action Plan.

1997 - The Potomac Headwaters Land Treatment Watershed Project is initiated, providing WV farmers with federal and state funds for implementation of water quality protection measures.

1998 - Federal Clean Water Action Plan is initiated, emphasizing a watershed approach to restoring the nations waters. MD passes Water Quality Improvement Act to address the problem of nutrient pollution. Potomac River is selected as an American Heritage River.

New Millenium

2000 - Chesapeake 2000 Agreement is signed. ICPRB turns 60 years old.

2002 - The Clean Water Act turns thirty and President Bush declares 2002 the "Year of Clean Water".

Potomac Timeline

Written by Administrator - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 April 2008 15:15
