Metropolitan Washington
Council of Governments

MEMORANDUM

TO: COG Board of Directors
FROM: COG Water Resources Program
SUBJECT: Regional Sewer Infrastructure, Water Quality, and Ongoing Repair Work
DATE: February 20, 2026

1. POTOMAC INTERCEPTOR SEWER PIPELINE OVERVIEW

- The Potomac Interceptor (PI) is a 54-mile-long regional sanitary sewer pipeline with two river crossings. It was constructed in the early 1960s by an Act of Congress (See Figure 1).
- The interceptor line carries about 60 million gallons of wastewater daily from Loudoun and Fairfax counties, areas near Washington Dulles International Airport, Vienna, Herndon, and Montgomery County to DC Water's Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant.
- Rehabilitating the PI is a high priority DC Water project. It is estimated that the PI project will take about 10 years and cost approximately $625 million.
- DC Water provides drinking water and wastewater (sewer) services in a service area of 725 square miles (Figure 1). DC Water operates 1,900 miles of sanitary and combined sewers, nine wastewater pumping stations, 16 stormwater pumping stations, 12 inflatable dams, and a combined sewer swirl facility. It treats wastewater for approximately 1.8 million people in neighboring jurisdictions, including Montgomery and Prince George's counties in Maryland and Fairfax and Loudoun counties in Virginia.

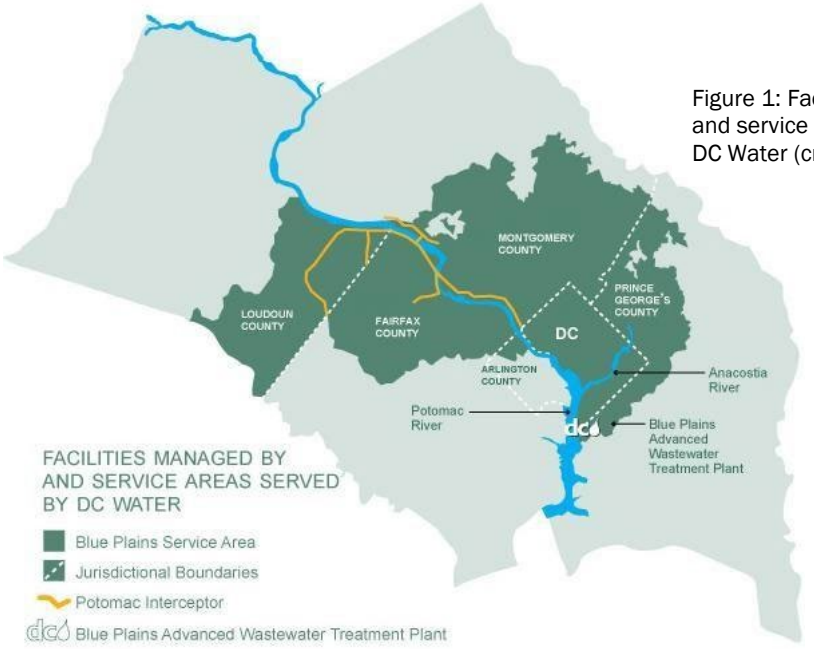


Figure 1: Facilities managed by and service areas served by DC Water (credit: DC Water)

2. OVERVIEW: A SECTION OF POTOMAC INTERCEPTOR SEWER COLLAPSES

- A section of the Potomac Interceptor collapsed on Monday, January 19, 2026, along Clara Barton Parkway and the I-495 interchange in Montgomery County, MD (Figure 2).
- The broken pipe measured about six feet in diameter and is estimated to have an average flow of 40 million gallons of untreated sewage a day. This break caused a sanitary sewer overflow into the C&O Canal National Historical Park, which then entered the Potomac River. This section carries wastewater from Loudoun and Fairfax counties in Virginia and parts of Montgomery County to DC Water's Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant.
- The pipeline, as built, has no redundancy or built-in bypasses. The section that collapsed was part of the planned rehabilitation, but work had not begun.

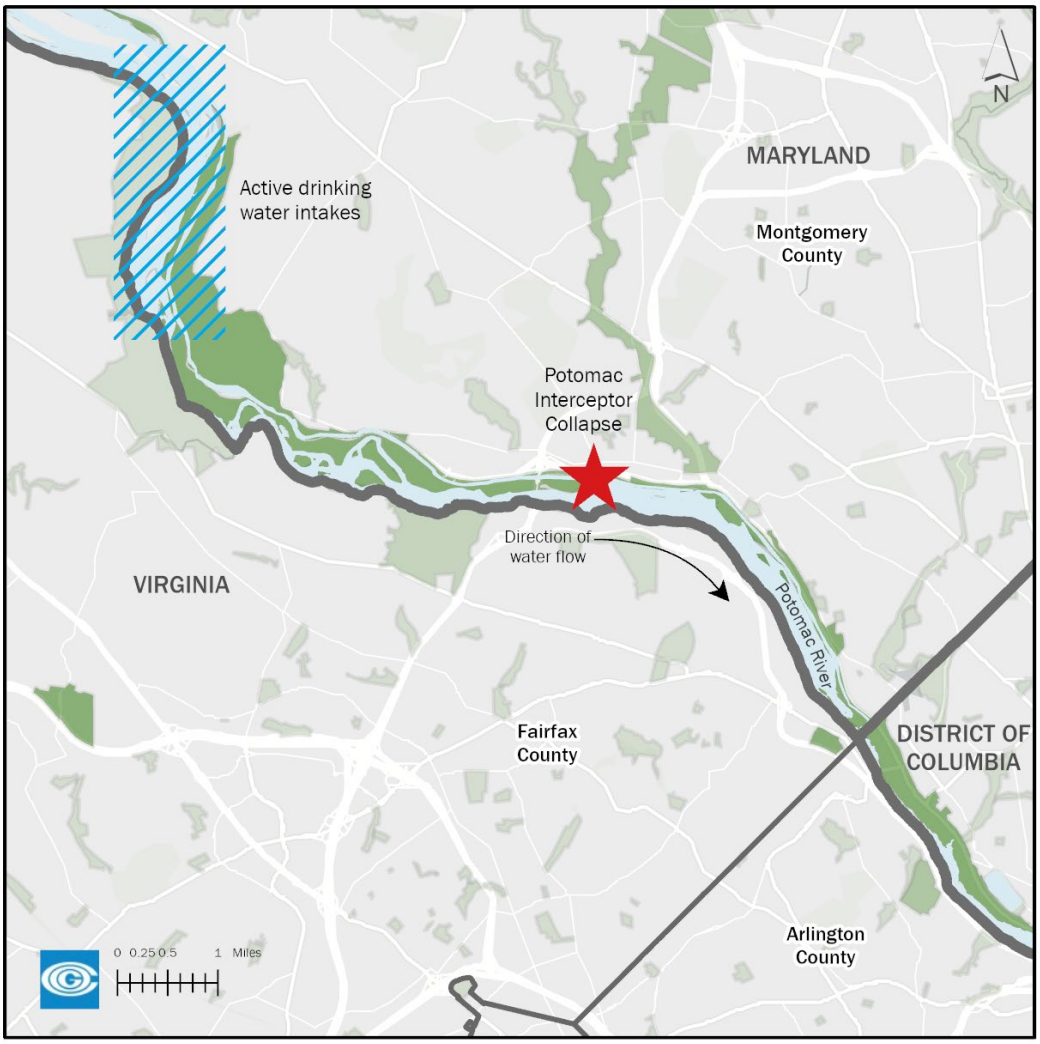


Figure 2. Pipeline Collapse Location (Source: COG)

The Maryland Department of the Environment identifies and describes the roles and responsibilities, as below, of the various agencies associated with the provision of water and sanitary sewer services in the region.

Key Agencies

- **District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority (DC Water)**: Pipe owner/operator; responsible for bypass, repairs, cleanup, and public signage. Gives operational updates to state and federal partners
- **United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**: Primary regulator and lead federal enforcement and compliance authority; enforces federal Clean Water Act regulations and oversees DC Water/Blue Plains consent decree.
- **Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE)**: Regulates unauthorized discharges into Maryland waterways and wetlands, monitors shellfish harvesting, and oversees drinking water safety and enforcement.
- **Maryland Department of Health**: Coordinates with local health departments on water contact advisories.
- **Virginia DEQ & VDH**: Monitors downstream water quality and public health.
- **DC Department of Energy and Environment**: Supports water, quality, monitoring, and issuing public health advisories for District residents.
- **Supporting Entities**: National Park Service and the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin coordinate monitoring, modeling, and river management, as well as oversee some permitting.

3. DC WATER'S RESPONSE TO THE PIPELINE COLLAPSE

Thus far, DC Water has completed numerous tasks that may be broadly summarized, as below. DC Water has also listed specific actions associated with this event chronologically, which is reproduced below.

- Has constructed bypass pumping systems to contain most of the overflow
- Is capturing and rerouting most of the wastewater with bypass pumping systems around the collapsed interceptor segment during repairs.
- Is monitoring bypass systems 24/7.
- Is conducting daily water quality sampling.
- Has stood up a dedicated DC Water webpage to provide information to the public, community organizations, and local, state, and federal stakeholders.
- Is developing an Environmental Restoration Plan with federal, state, and local regulators.

Key Dates and Actions Taken

Monday, January 19, 2026

- Overflow reported late day
- Emergency response mobilized
- Public notification issued of Sanitary Sewer Overflow
- Estimated 40 MGD escaping from collapse site into Potomac River

Tuesday, January 20, 2026

- Investigation and assessment underway
- Bypass plan developed using pumps to divert the wastewater around the damaged pipe section into an isolated section of the C & O Canal and back into the Potomac Interceptor further downstream

Saturday, January 24, 2026

- Downstream reinforcement completed
- Bypass pumping system activated late day
- Most overflow contained, but some wastewater continues to escape

Tuesday, January 27, 2026

- Excavation and stabilization of collapse site begins

Saturday, January 31, 2026

- Cleaning begins to remove debris and obstructions blocking access to the damaged pipe section

Thursday, February 5, 2026

- CCTV inspection conducted due to ongoing challenges with large rocks
- Significant rock dam discovered, requiring manual removal and heavy equipment
- Enhanced bypass system will need to be constructed to safely remove rock dam
- Expected to take 4-6 weeks to complete enhanced system

Friday, February 6, 2026

- First week of water quality sampling data released
- Flow monitoring data provides estimates on volume of overflow; approximately 243 million gallons of wastewater released
- 194 million gallons overflowed in first five days before bypass was activated

Saturday, February 7, 2026

- Construction underway on enhanced bypass pumping system and bulkhead gate

Sunday, February 8, 2026

- Significant overflow events occur during a high flow period on Super Bowl Sunday while several bypass pumps were temporarily taken out of service for maintenance, reducing overall pumping capacity.
- Approximately 600,000 gallons overflowed into the Potomac River

Tuesday, February 10, 2026

- Two bypass pumps clogged with wipes and had to be taken offline for cleaning. This occurred during a high-flow period and contributed to an overflow event.

Saturday, February 14, 2026

- New high-capacity pumps installed and activated as part of enhanced bypass system

Thursday, February 19, 2026

- DC Water successfully reached the damaged section of the Potomac Interceptor, marking a critical step in the ongoing damage assessment and repair efforts. Crews manually digging out the affected area, carefully removing sludge, soil, and debris from the collapsed pipe.
- Crews were able to reach the damaged pipe section, after the successful installation of a steel bulkhead gate that is now blocking all flow in the pipe.
- The enhanced bypass pumping system is fully operational and diverting wastewater around the collapse site and back into the Potomac Interceptor further downstream.

DC Water notes the next step, once the collapse site is cleared, is for work to begin to remove a 30-foot rock dam blocking the pipe. Repairs are expected to be completed by mid-March, restoring full flow and function to the Potomac Interceptor. At that point, the bypass pumping system utilizing the C&O Canal will no longer be needed.

4. DRINKING WATER REMAINS SAFE

The Potomac River is the drinking water source for approximately 85 percent of the region. All active drinking water intakes are located upstream of the collapse site. Regional drinking water utilities treat Potomac River water through filtration and disinfection processes before distribution. All regional water systems report that drinking water is not affected by the spill

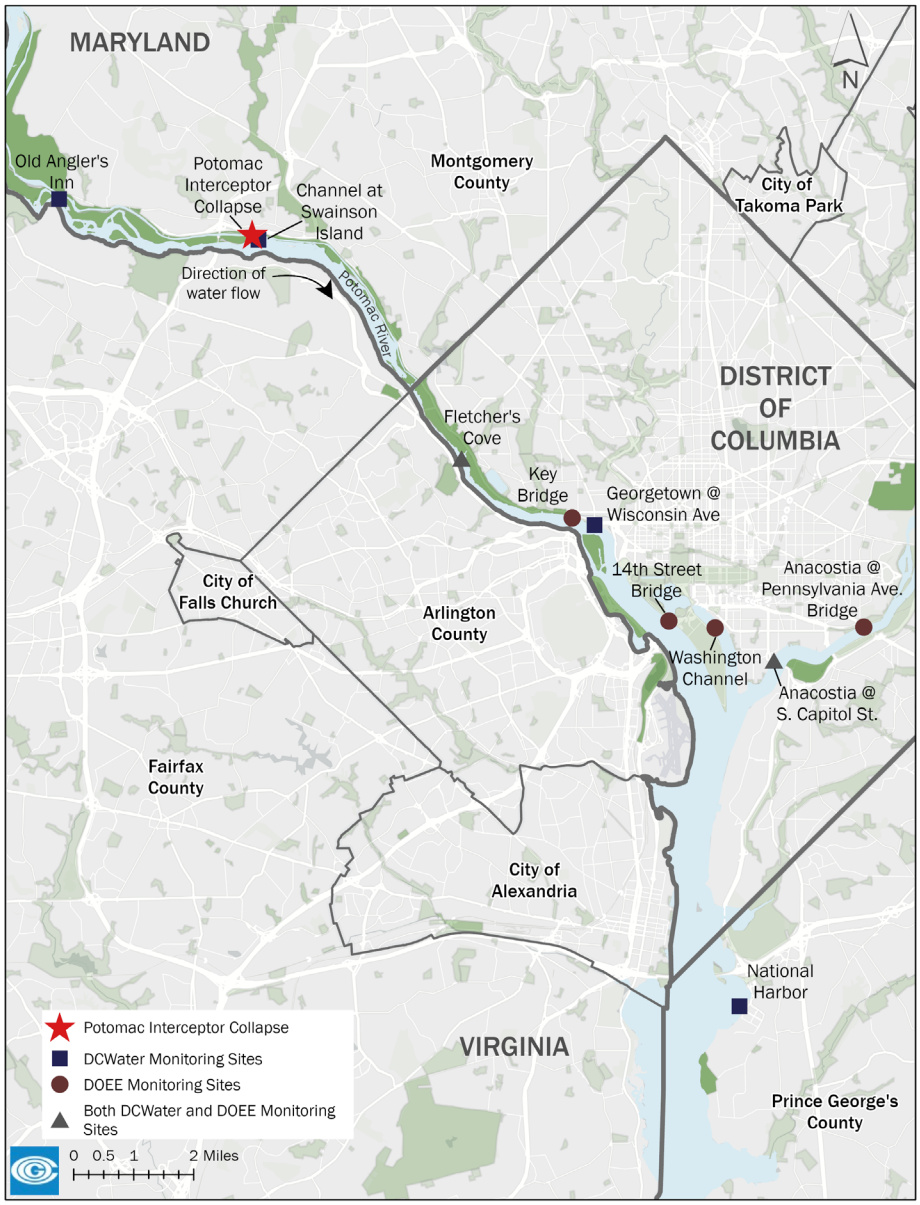
- The Washington Aqueduct[1] confirmed that the Potomac Interceptor collapse did not affect drinking water treatment operations or the regional water supply.
- The District's Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE) has advised the public that DC drinking water remains safe. The department is tracking regional test results and has established a dedicated webpage to share these results.
- The Maryland Department of the Environment has advised that all active Maryland drinking water intakes are upstream and unaffected. The department has established a dedicated webpage providing information of the test results, chronology of events, FAQs and other resources.
- Fairfax Water and Loudoun Water have made similar drinking water announcements.

[1] The Washington Aqueduct is a division of the Baltimore District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineer. It produces drinking water for approximately one million citizens living, working, or visiting in the District of Columbia, Arlington County, Virginia, and other areas in northern Virginia to include portions of Fairfax County. The Aqueduct is a federally owned and operated public water supply agency that produces an average of 135 million gallons of water per day at two treatment plants located in the District of Columbia.

5. WATER QUALITY SAMPLING LOCATIONS

DC Water initiated daily sampling for E. coli, an indicator bacterium, at six (6) locations beginning on January 29, 2026, utilizing a contracted environmental firm and a certified laboratory (Figure 3). Sampling locations include the overflow area as well as upstream and downstream sites. Downstream Potomac River sampling locations showed E. coli levels have been below EPA recreational standards (410 MPN) since February 2, 2026, according to DC Water monitoring. This finding applies only to the specific downstream sites tested.

Figure 3: Water sampling locations (credit: COG)



DC Water reports "Overall, results show mostly decreasing trends since the start of sampling. Results at these sites, particularly the elevated concentrations observed at the overflow site in recent days, are expected as a result of limited overflow events that occurred. These are likely influenced by ice and snowmelt, which may increase system flows, contributing to overflow events during this emergency repair. Although the overflow is now mostly contained, E. coli levels are expected to continue fluctuating over time due to residual impacts from the incident and ongoing influences from weather conditions such as precipitation, snowmelt, temperature variability, and other natural sources of E. coli bacteria such as wildlife."

DC Water publishes the results of water quality sampling on its web page and notes the results reflect corrections made after a review of the sampling data that identified errors. (Figure 4 at the end of the memo) DOEE also publishes the results of water quality sampling on its web page.

6. ADVICE TO THE PUBLIC

DC Water as of February 18, 2026 had the following notification and advisory for the public on its webpage: The public is reminded to avoid contact with untreated sewage as it may carry bacteria and viruses. Anyone who comes in contact with the wastewater overflow should:

- Leave the area immediately.
- Wash exposed skin thoroughly with soap and clean water.
- Disinfect any affected areas or items.
- Do not consume food or water that may have been exposed.
- Seek medical attention if symptoms occur.

The District, Maryland and Virginia have issued incident notifications, advisories, and shellfish closures.

The region's water utilities encourage residents to avoid flushing ANY wipes or non-disposable items, as these materials can interfere with pumping operations during emergency response and repair activities.

Residents can also report suspected fish and wildlife injuries related to the incident to the District or Maryland.

7. REGIONAL COORDINATION ACTIVITIES AT COG

COG is working with its member governments and partners on the following coordination activities.

- Providing briefings and updates across jurisdictions, including a regional briefing for officials from the District, Maryland, and Virginia scheduled for February 23, 2026.
- Aligning and amplifying messaging across jurisdictions (e.g., safe drinking water, health advisories, wipes guidance, and PI resilience investments);
- Coordinating water quality monitoring activities across jurisdictions (e.g., state and local governments, DC Water, University of Maryland, and others)

Figure 4: E. Coli (MPN/100 ml) testing results (credit: DC Water)

Sample Date	Old Anglers Inn (upstream of collapse)	New Drainage Channel @ Overflow (Swainson Island)	Fletcher's Boathouse	Georgetown @ Wisconsin Ave.	National Harbor	Anacostia @ S. Capitol Street
E. Coli (MPN/100 ml)						
1/29/2026	11	570,000	14,300	18,600	< 1	2
1/30/2026	4	60,000	3,000	2,700	3	11
1/31/2026	3	30,000	1,200	5,100	2	6
2/1/2026	27	80,000	488	300	4	21
2/2/2026	6	242,000	397	173	31	6
2/3/2026	4	460,000	68	53	15	30
2/4/2026	5	210,000	49	48	178	45
2/5/2026	1	77,000	38	84	33	16
2/6/2026	22	**242,000**	108	238	**10**	23
2/7/2026	15	86,600	79	114	24	16
2/8/2026	15	130,000	260	43	27	47
2/9/2026	16	730,000	20	20	< 1	5
2/10/2026	7	600,000	17	20	2	2
2/11/2026	8	155,000	3	19	6	< 1
2/12/2026	5	105,000	7	75	14	8
2/13/2026	7	155,000	33	548	8	23
2/14/2026	3	141,000	< 100	153	2	17
2/15/2026	2	199,000	58	84	3	18
2/16/2026	76	173,000	111	238	138	1,550
2/17/2026	59	16,700	3	387	88	23
2/18/2026	43	5,000	105	162	121	40

DC Water Notes:

1. Lab results are unavailable on weekends and will be provided on the following Monday (excluding holidays).
2. The results in BOLD are updated, the most significant of which was the sample taken near the drainage channel on February 6. The previous data indicated 2,420 MPN/100mL when the results were 242,000 MPN/100mL.
3. Historical data indicate typical E. coli levels in the Potomac River can range from 10 to 5,000 MPN/100mL. Variability in E. coli results are common and are influenced by multiple factors, such as weather (rainfall/snow melt and associated runoff) and subwatershed activities and conditions, including aging sewer infrastructure and illicit discharges.
4. Consistent with public health and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standards, swimming is not recommended when E. coli levels exceed 410 MPN/100 mL.