



POTOMAC INTERCEPTOR BRIEFING

What happened and why it matters regionally

Steve Bieber
Water Resources Program Director

COG Board of Directors
March 11, 2026

Photo courtesy of DC Water



Metropolitan Washington
Council of Governments

Agenda Item #8

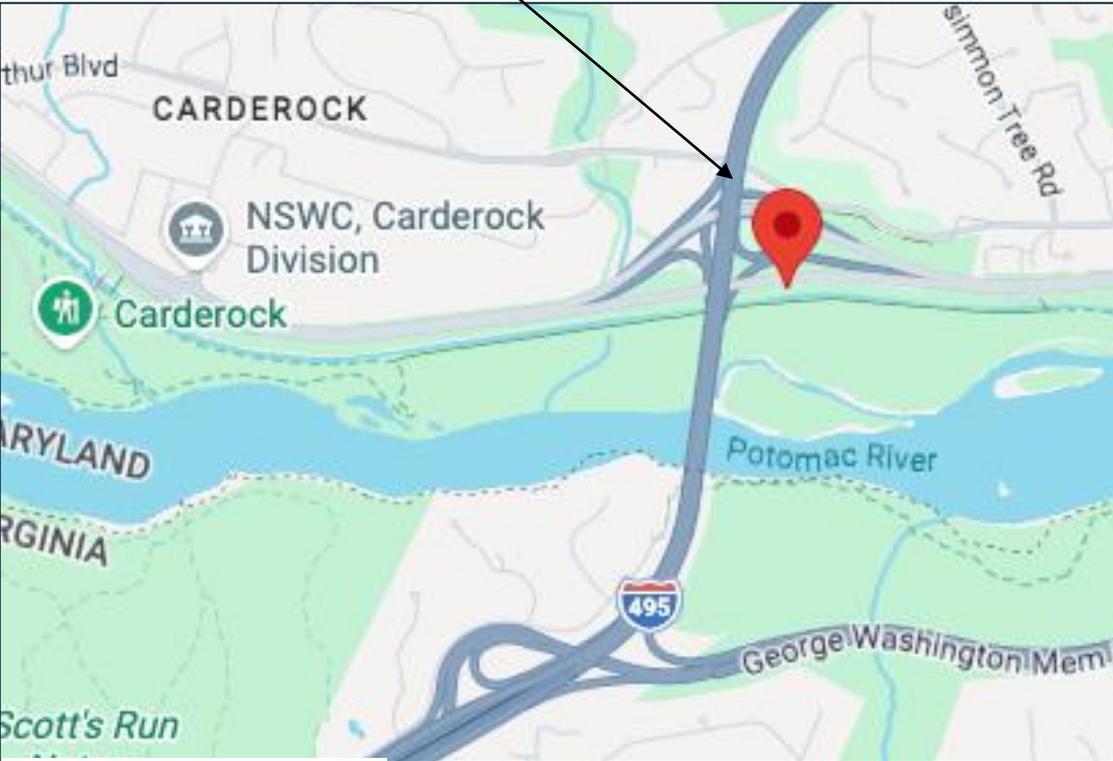
Potomac Interceptor – a federally authorized, interstate asset central to regional growth and water quality



- Authorized by Congress under Public Law 86-515 (1960).
- Built 1961-1963 to serve Dulles Airport and fast-growing suburbs.
- Conveys ~60 million gallons per day (MGD) of wastewater across DC, MD, and VA.
- Regional, multi-jurisdictional asset that is owned and operated by DC Water.
- Backbone of regional wastewater system for 60+ years.

Graphic courtesy of DC Water

Pipe break: 72"
diameter reinforced
concrete pipe



Potomac Interceptor Collapse – Localized failure, regional consequences

- On January 19, 2026, a 72-inch-diameter section of the Potomac Interceptor sanitary sewer collapsed along Clara Barton Parkway near the I-495 interchange in Montgomery County, Maryland, within the C&O Canal National Historical Park.
- The collapse caused a major sanitary sewer overflow, releasing an estimated 240–300 million gallons of untreated wastewater into the C&O Canal and the Potomac River.
- DC Water mobilized emergency crews and installed a temporary bypass pumping system, activated on January 24, to reroute wastewater around the failed section and limit additional discharges.

Graphic courtesy of DC Water



Response and Repair

- Roughly one month since the last overflow reached the Potomac River as the emergency repair on the damaged Potomac Interceptor nears completion.

STEP	ACTIVITY	TIMELINE
1	Bypass Installation - Install temporary bypass pumping to reroute flow through canal around damaged pipe section	Completed
2	Investigation and Excavation - Excavate downstream of pipe, clean and identify scope of blockage	Completed
3	Repair and Flow Restoration – Install bulkhead and bypass chamber; remove rock dam and repair collapsed section to restore flow	February to mid-March
4	Environmental Rehabilitation – Restore affected areas including drainage channel, C&O Canal and Potomac River shoreline to Swainson Island	Following repair

Graphic courtesy of DC Water

Response and Repair



MH Upstream of Collapse



Overflow in Drainage Channel



Setting Up Bypass Pumps



Coffer Dam in Canal



Channel Back to PI



Potomac River Bacteria Sampling

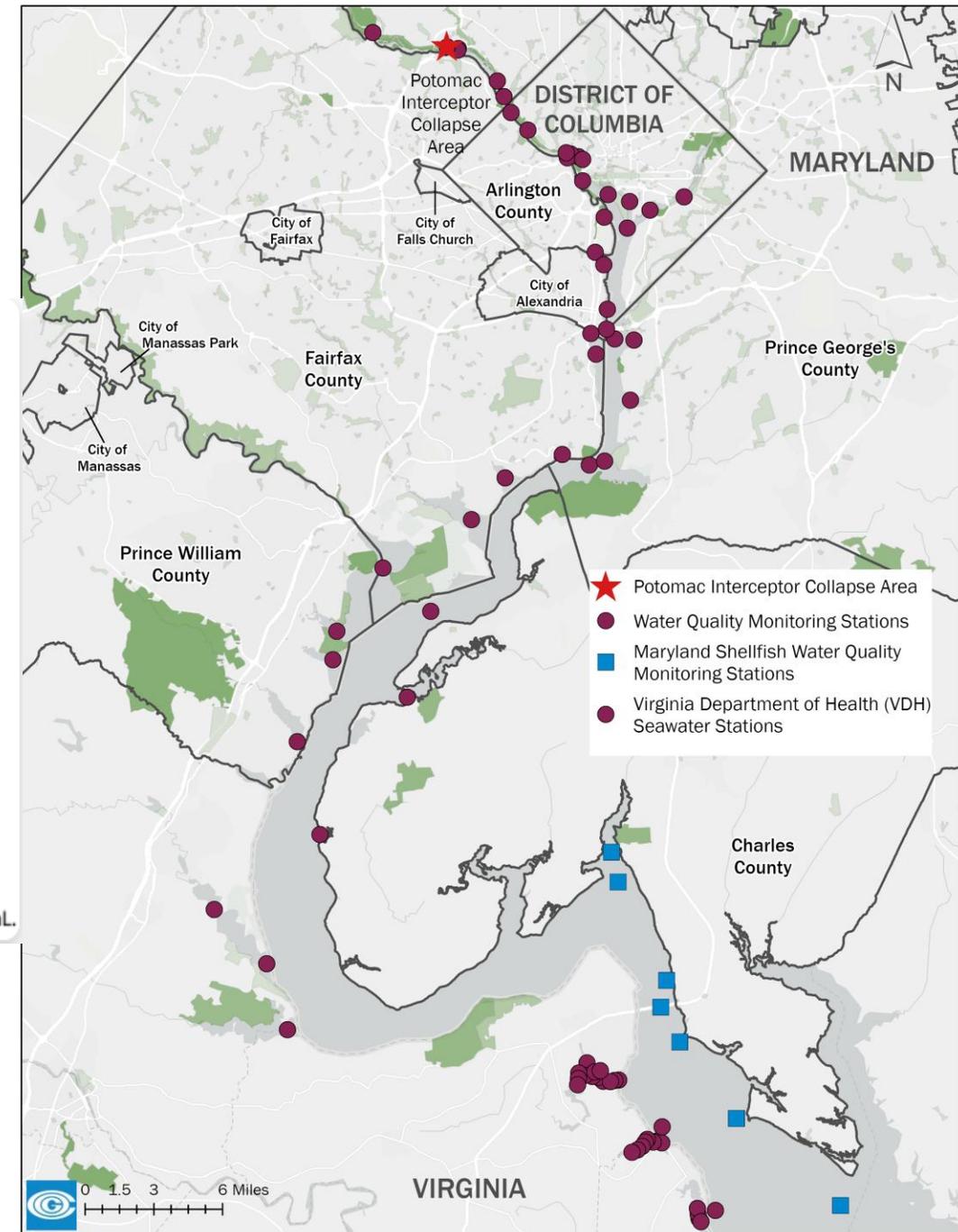
>recreation limit
 <below recreation limit

Sample Date	<i>E. coli</i> (MPN/100 ml)									
	Old Anglers Inn (upstream of collapse)	Near Drainage Channel @ Overflow (Swainson Island)	Between Minnie's Island and north shore of Potomac River	South Side of Minnie's Island	Sycamore Island	Lock 6	Fletcher's Boathouse	Georgetown @ Wisconsin Ave	Anacostia @ S. Cap St	National Harbor
3/02/2026	9	2,300	43	6	N/S	N/S	10	89	17	12
3/03/2026	4	2,420	16	12	N/S	N/S	11	61	13	8
3/04/2026	22	2,100	62	18	76	49	13	124	15	39
3/05/2026	36	2,420	15	17	44	39	13	58	26	31
3/06/2026	13	1,120	26	13	71	59	39	816	16	29
3/07/2026	44	1,410	55	23	36	25	20	24	20	13
3/08/2026	291	1,050	345	365	291	308	260	291	14	11

Note: MPN = most probable number

*Consistent with public health and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standards, swimming is not recommended when *E. coli* levels exceed 410 MPN/100 mL.

Graphic courtesy of DC Water





Spill Volume vs. Potomac River Flow

Spill Volume Compared to River Flow

Spill volume approximately 90 minutes of recent Potomac River flow.

Equivalent Nutrient Loading Impact

Nutrient load about half a day of average upstream nitrogen and phosphorus load.

Environmental Significance

Brief but intense nutrient pulses can cause short-term water quality impacts. Monitoring is ongoing to assess water quality conditions.

Photo courtesy of NPS



Metropolitan Washington
Council of Governments



Graphic courtesy of DC Water

Why this matters regionally

Potomac River Watershed

Watershed includes 14,670 square miles through Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and the District

Potomac Interceptor is Shared Regional Infrastructure

It underpins economic growth, environmental protection, and interstate cooperation across the National Capital Region. Repair and rehabilitation costs are addressed through existing cost-allocation mechanisms in the Blue Plains IMA.

Federal Participation is Important

It reflects interstate and federal interests. Rehabilitation of the Potomac Interceptor is a federal-regional responsibility.



Messaging Coordination



Arlington Department of Environmental Services
@ArlingtonDES

Arlington drinking water: safe, clean, sustainable, inexpensive. Learn more: arlingtonva.us/Government/Pro...



Fairfax Water
@fairfax_water

Fairfax Water Update: Your drinking water and is unaffected by the Potomac Interceptor sewer m occurred downstream of Fairfax Water's Potom means it does not affect water quality or service. Learn more at fairfaxwater.org/news/your-water



Loudoun Water
@LoudounWater

Protect your pipes—don't flush wipes! Even if the package says "flushable," they do not break down like toilet paper and will cause serious clogs and plumbing backups. Learn more: bit.ly/1WtOXL0 #ProtectYourPipes



COG
@MWCOG

As the region recovers from the Potomac sewage spill, do your part to prevent more sewage overflows. Don't flush any wipes, even wipes labeled "flushable." They don't dissolve and can clog pipes.



DC Water
@dcwater

Pumping challenges continue at the damaged Potomac Interceptor. Two pumps clogged w/non-disposable wipes Monday night, causing an overflow & contained on-site. E. coli levels remain elevated at collapse site, downstream levels remain below EPA standards. dcwater.com/about-dc-water...



WSSC Water
February 20 at 12:45 PM

Aunque digan "desechables", las toallitas húmedas NO se disuelven.
✗ Tíralas al bote de basura para prevenir taponamientos en las tuberías.
Even if they say "disposable," wet wipes DO NOT dissolve.
✗ Throw them in the trash can to prevent clogs in pipes.





Cost and Blue Plains IMA

Near-term emergency costs are modest; long-term rehabilitation is the more challenging

Emergency Response and Repair ~\$30 million

Near-term Capital Projects ~\$390 million

Long-term Capital Project ~\$600 million over 10 years

Blue Plains IMA

A regional agreement to share wastewater conveyance and treatment services provided by the Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant, the Potomac Interceptor, and other multi-jurisdictional use facilities.

Cost Allocation

Repair and rehabilitation costs are addressed through IMA cost-allocation mechanisms. Federal participation reduces long-term ratepayer exposure across multiple jurisdictions.

Photo courtesy of DC Water



COG Actions and Next Steps

- **Monitoring and Messaging** – COG is serving as a regional convener—especially around monitoring, information sharing, and coordination.
- **Governance** – COG provides secretariat, technical and legal support to the Committees associated with the 2012 IMA; over 40 years of successful cooperation and integrated planning for ~50% of the region’s wastewater capacity.
- **Federal Advocacy** – COG is working with regional partners and the Congressional delegation to pursue federal funding for regional interstate assets like the Potomac Interceptor. This includes a \$395 million request under WRDA, a \$144 million request under the Clean Water SRF, and considering additional funding strategies.



Steve Bieber

Water Resources Program Director
(202) 962-3219
sbieber@mwkog.org

mwkog.org

777 North Capitol Street NE, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20002

Appendix A – Links for more information

COG: Sewer pipeline collapse information and resources (Updated) - News Highlight - News | Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

External Resources

DC Water Potomac Interceptor landing page

DC Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE)

Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE)

Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (VDEQ)

Virginia Department of Health (VDH)