

The St. Mary's River drains the central county including Lexington Park, and it has seen its share of environmental problems. However, the river is still deemed relatively healthy by those who have been monitoring its water quality for years now.

Last Thursday, the team serving on the St. Mary's River Project took Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) and Del. John L. Bohanan Jr. (D-St. Mary's) out on the river.

The sea nettles were hanging around the dock at the boathouse of St. Mary's College of Maryland, but they disappeared as the boat went up river toward Tippetty Wichity Island.

This year has been better for sea grasses in the river, said Chris Tanner, one of the two principal investigators for the project. "And we've got sea horses back, the first time in five years," he said.

There hasn't been much rain recently, minimizing runoff, and that has been good for water quality. But when it gets very hot in the summer as it did a few weeks ago, the levels of dissolved oxygen plummet, which kills sea grasses and other aquatic life. When conditions are dry, the river's salinity increases, which is good for sea grasses.

However, oysters tend to do better when there is lower salinity as it keeps down parasites, Tanner said.

"Life's a series of tradeoffs," Hoyer said.

As the group presented him with a myriad of data on the river's water quality, he said there needs to be a median standard and a standard goal to strive for. "Where are we? Where should we be? How do we get where we need to be?" he said.

Robert Paul, the project's other investigator, said he is working to share the river data with local government to aid in land-use decisions.

St. Mary's River called 'clean' despite its stress

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“Development is just rampant,” Paul said. “It’s hard not to get discouraged because development is such a strong force.”

Despite the dead zones that sometimes appear in the St. Mary’s, “This is still a relatively clean river,” Tanner said.

The river project has been studying the river for seven years, with federal aid totaling \$1.1 million.