

Here's what the troubled Potomac River needs to get healthy, according to a [report released Thursday](#) by a group devoted to protecting it: more forests and farmland to filter toxic rainwater.

But the forests started being stripped long ago, in part to make way for farms. And now farms are being paved over by urban sprawl and asphalt, allowing rain to flow more rapidly to the river, according to the [Potomac Conservancy](#)'s fourth annual report on the Potomac region.

Even existing farms contribute to the problem, the report said. They're studded with pesticides, nutrients, other chemicals and manure that wash into the river, which is the source of the region's drinking water.

The report called on Potomac region governments, including the District, Virginia and Maryland, and the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), to protect the river from sprawl by preserving more forest and purchasing farmland to slow sprawl.

The report, the "State of the Nation's River 2010," further called on governments to strengthen inspections of farms where livestock produce tons of manure. The waste contains hormones that contaminate fish and nutrients that cause vegetation to grow abnormally.

"Simply put, when it comes to protecting water quality and providing drinking water, farms and forests matter," said Hedrick Belin, president of the Conservancy.

The Conservancy's report comes two weeks before Chesapeake Bay states are expected to submit plans to reduce the [bay's diet of pollution](#), as required by the EPA.

Two of the states, Virginia and Pennsylvania, support a clean river but disagree with the EPA's approach. From the EPA's perspective, [the District](#) and Maryland worked harder to meet its requirements.

An organization that represents farmers opposes the Conservancy's report. "We don't agree with groups that propose higher regulations on farms," said Valerie Connelly, a spokeswoman

for the [Maryland Farm Bureau](#) . "Here in Maryland, we think we're doing a good job."

Connelly said the state has had a plan to limit nutrients that flow into the river system from farms for decades. She said environmental groups too often promote solutions one year, only to say they don't work the next.

"We need to figure out what actually gets the job done" when it comes to cleaning the Potomac, Connelly said. "If it costs 10 times as much for our farmers to operate farms as other states, our farmers can't compete."

The report blamed sprawl for erasing more than three-quarters of a million acres of forests in 30 years.

More than half of the land in the Potomac River basin is forested. But for excellent health, the river basin's tree cover should be about 65 percent, the report said.

"The bay has not improved in the last 26 years," said Ed Merrifield, president of Potomac Riverkeeper. "The water we drink comes from all those areas upstream that produce all that pollution, and that includes agriculture."

###