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North Branch of Potomac becomes recreational center

By Paul J. Nyden

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MORGANTOWN -- After decades of pollution, Maryland state agencies have turned the North Branch of the Potomac River into a major recreational area and boon to local economic development.

The North Branch runs along the border between the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia and western Maryland.

Downstream Strategies, a Morgantown environmental consulting firm, released a report last month documenting local economic benefits from improving water quality in the river.

During the past 25 years, the North Branch changed from a river "you wouldn't even want to wade in" to a high quality fishery hosting naturally reproducing trout and bass, the report states.

Improvements came after eight "dosers" were installed in 1992. These facilities add alkaline chemicals to the North Branch and its tributaries to counteract acid mine drainage from abandoned coal mines.

But ongoing remediation projects, initiated by Maryland state agencies, could be threatened within a few years if funding sources evaporate.

If federal funds disappear, the acid-neutralizing dosers will be shut down, threatening the economic advantages the North Branch Potomac River has created in the last generation, the report says.

The Downstream Strategies report -- titled "The Benefits of Acid Mine Drainage Remediation on the North Branch Potomac River" -- states, "In the 1940s, an estimated 173,000 pounds of acidity entered the Potomac River system from abandoned coal mines each year; through the 1960s, the problem worsened to 120,000 pounds daily."

During the 1970s, abandoned coal mines continued to discharge acid drainage into about 450 miles of streams and rivers.

"While acid mine drainage was the most important water quality issue, other problems existed such as pollution from a pulp and paper mill in Luke [Md.] and wastewater from the towns of Luke and Westernport, Md. and Piedmont, W.Va.," according to Downstream.

Neil Jacobs, a member of the Maryland State Water Quality Advisory Committee, said, "Bringing the North Branch Potomac back to life demonstrates what innovative and aggressive efforts on the part of state agencies can produce when acting within the spirit of the Clean Water Act."

In 1996, Maryland Department of Natural Resources issued a report stating the Upper North Branch of the Potomac River in Garrett County was still polluted by metals and other sediments and still had acid waters.

Recreational opportunities, including fishing and whitewater rafting, increased after water quality was improved, Jacobs said.

Today, 13 commercial fishing and whitewater outfitters use the North Branch.

Downstream Strategies also conducted a survey of fishermen that found they spend about \$2.1 million a year in Garrett and Allegany counties.

The federal grant that provides funds will not expire until 2022, but some sources of Maryland

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state funds are already declining.

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