



American Rivers

Thriving By Nature

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2009

#4 Mattawoman Creek

Maryland

Threat: Proposed highway and poorly planned development

SUMMARY

Mattawoman Creek is one of the few tidal, freshwater tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay that remains healthy and unspoiled. Although Maryland's Department of Natural Resources has concluded that Mattawoman should be protected from overdevelopment, a proposed highway in Charles County threatens the creek's clean water and popular fishing and recreation opportunities. Unless the Maryland Department of the Environment and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers deny a key wetland permit for the proposed highway, Maryland will lose this treasured gem and the goal of a healthy Chesapeake Bay will slip further from reach.

THE RIVER

Located near some of the earliest European settlements in the New World, Mattawoman Creek is derived from an Algonquin term meaning "where one goes pleasantly." Today, Mattawoman Creek drains 94 square miles in Maryland's Charles and Prince Georges Counties. It flows 27 miles from the forested wetlands of Maryland's coastal plain before joining with the Potomac River south of the nation's capitol.

Nestled among still-extensive forests in this growing region, Mattawoman sustains a thriving recreation industry and is one of the region's largest tourist draws. Kayaking and canoeing are prized experiences on the creek's quiet tidal waters, while scores of bass fishing tournaments are launched from its shores every year as part of the Potomac River's internationally-renowned, multi-million dollar largemouth bass fishery.

Mattawoman Creek is a key refuge for many beleaguered fish and wildlife species. While migratory fish populations such as American shad, alewife and blueback herring, and yellow perch have dropped to historic lows along most of the eastern seaboard, Mattawoman Creek is home to more than forty times the concentrations of some of these fish than can be found in other Bay tributaries. Mattawoman Creek hosts state-protected wildlands, tidal-fresh marshes recognized as Wetlands of International Importance,

Maryland's largest breeding wood-duck population, notable concentrations of herons and egrets and is one of only three state sites that harbor the American Lotus.

THE THREAT

Mattawoman Creek is threatened by a proposed extension to Charles County's four-lane Cross County Connector (known as the CCC-ex) that would cut across the heart of the watershed. Charles County Commissioners are pushing for the \$70 million CCC-ex in order to connect Waldorf, the county's urban center, to the tiny town of Bryans Road. The County's plan is to use the highway to convert this one-stoplight town into a new edge city and commercial center. Unfortunately, the new highway also would induce waves of further development outside state-sanctioned growth areas and over thousands of acres of forest and wetlands in the Mattawoman watershed.

Less damaging alternatives exist, such as utilizing existing four-lane highways and investing in modern light rail and transit-oriented development in Waldorf.

Scientists note that once ten percent of a watershed is covered by impervious surfaces like roads, parking lots and rooftops, stream health and clean water suffer significantly. The Mattawoman Creek watershed is already approaching this ten percent limit, and the highway and its accompanying development would push it over the brink. The Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) stated that intense development of the watershed would have severe repercussions on the biological community and would decrease habitat quality within the estuary. Also at risk is the loss of the county's economically valuable "natural infrastructure" -- the healthy forests, wetlands and floodplains that filter water, provide natural flood protection, contribute to the overall health of the Bay, and sustain Charles County's recreation-based economy.

In an era of global warming it is more important than ever that healthy streams like Mattawoman Creek are protected. The creek can serve as a refuge for fish and wildlife stressed by more intense storms and higher temperatures. A healthy Mattawoman Creek will also provide resilience to the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem as a whole, and will help the Bay's web of life weather the impacts of global warming.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The Maryland Department of Environment (MDE) and the Corps are considering applications for key permits needed for the CCC-ex to move forward, including both state and federal wetland-fill permits and a state water-quality certification that could be issued as soon as mid-May. The agencies must deny these permits. If not, Governor Martin O'Malley must request that the Corps prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to analyze the full economic, social, and environmental cost of the CCC-ex and associated development.

The Environmental Protection Agency and Maryland Department of Natural Resources have raised serious concerns, and local communities and state and regional environmental and recreation groups have filed strong comments opposing the project. Such public

controversy should trigger initiation of an EIS, if not an outright denial of permits for the CCC-ex.

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