



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

This review is one of several conducted by the Office of Inspector General in response to a congressional request. We sought to determine how well the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is assisting its Chesapeake Bay partners in cleaning up the Bay. This report evaluates the progress in controlling discharges from wastewater treatment facilities.

Background

Nutrient overload has been identified as the primary cause of water quality degradation within the Chesapeake Bay. Wastewater treatment facilities are responsible for approximately 20 percent of nutrient discharges into the Bay. Of this amount, the 483 largest or "significant" facilities account for 95 percent of the discharges. Wastewater treatment facility operations are governed by the Clean Water Act's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Permitting Program.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional and Public Liaison at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2008/20080108-08-P-0049.pdf

Despite Progress, EPA Needs to Improve Oversight of Wastewater Upgrades in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed

What We Found

Chesapeake Bay wastewater treatment facilities risk not meeting the 2010 deadline for nutrient reductions if key facilities are not upgraded in time. In the 7 years since signing the Chesapeake 2000 Agreement, EPA and its State partners have taken a number of steps to lay the foundation for achieving the 2010 wastewater nutrient reduction goals. Water quality standards have been set, nutrient loadings have been allocated, and nutrient limits are beginning to be incorporated into permits. However, States need to finish adding nutrient limits to the permits, and the facilities will need to make significant reductions in the 3 years remaining before the deadline. Crucially, these reductions will need to be maintained once achieved. Significant challenges include generating sufficient funding and addressing continuing population growth. EPA needs to better monitor progress to ensure needed upgrades occur on time and loading reductions are achieved and maintained. Otherwise, Bay waters will continue to be impaired, adversely affecting living resources throughout the ecosystem that supports commercial and recreational uses.

We also looked at the potential for obtaining additional reductions from wastewater treatment facilities to compensate for goals not being met in other areas, but determined that this would not be practical or cost effective.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the EPA Region 3 Regional Administrator work with the States to establish interim construction milestones for priority facilities; monitor milestone and financial funding progress for these facilities; and continue efforts in developing effective and credible water quality trading programs. The Regional Administrator should also have EPA and States continue to evaluate industrial discharges and refine industrial nutrient cap loads where appropriate. In response to our draft report, EPA concurred with all our recommendations and estimated that wastewater facilities will come close to achieving the nutrient reduction goals in 2010. EPA's estimate was based on new information which had not been verified by EPA and was received too late for the OIG to evaluate.