

Potomac Interceptor Collapse

Community Concerns and DC Water Response

DC Water hears your concerns, and we share them, including how the Potomac Interceptor collapse could happen Potomac Interceptor collapse, and how this could have happened. We take your concerns very seriously, and our top subject matter experts within the Authority have provided responses to the most commonly heard concerns from our customers and community.

From Day One, our priority has been controlling the flow to protect public health, the Potomac, and our environment to the greatest extent possible. We have been on site for weeks, around the clock, working in wet, confined spaces in sub-freezing temperatures. Here are some of the concerns we've heard most from the community, and our responses.

I am concerned that the spill could pose a threat to my drinking water.

There is no risk to the region's drinking water from this incident. All of our wastewater lines are completely separate from our drinking water. The Washington Aqueduct draws water from the river further upstream and treats the water at their facility.

I am concerned that the Potomac and its ecosystems won't recover from this.

That's a fair concern under the circumstances, but there has been no spill that reached the Potomac since February 8, and testing results across our sites show E. coli levels are trending in the right direction, and we are optimistic that with the additional support from the Clean Rivers Tunnels already under construction, the Potomac will recover faster than you might expect.

Our rehabilitation plan addresses uncontrolled overflow areas and also C&O Canal rehabilitation, which includes portions of the channel along the Clara Barton Parkway, the culvert under the Canal, and the river shore to Swainson Island.

I am concerned that a similar incident could happen upstream from our drinking water intakes.

That concerns us as well. Washington, DC is the only major metropolitan city in the United States that does not have a second source of drinking water. That's why DC Water has been exploring solutions in recent years to build a more resilient drinking water supply. It's going to take more than one approach, but we have already announced the launch of Pure Water DC, which will purify the water received through the Clean Rivers Tunnels to a potable standard. We are breaking ground on our Pure Water DC Discovery Center this summer, and we continue to explore additional solutions to build redundancy.

I am concerned that the water testing results continue to vary on E.coli contamination.

It is important to remember that overall, levels are trending in the right direction, and there is water sampling being conducted by multiple agencies at numerous locations. We believe that the minor fluctuations are the result of environmental factors.

When we have precipitation, it can wash residue from the ground at the site to the river. Additionally, when we had the extended cold snap, a portion of the sewage was essentially trapped in ice, and those contaminants were released over time as the ice thawed.

I am concerned that I didn't hear about this sooner. Why is that?

From the very beginning, the Authority has been focused on addressing the crisis of the collapse. We were immediately in touch with the EPA and our government stakeholders to maintain communication throughout the response. We established an immediate cadence of regular updates to the public via our website.

I am concerned that I am not able to fish in the river. Will I be able to fish in the river this summer? Will the shellfish be safe to eat by then?

With respect to fishing, the District Department of Energy and the Environment, the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), and the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) each manage advisories for sections of the river within their jurisdiction. DC Water recommends avoiding contact with the river water for 72 hours following a heavy rainfall.

Regulations are stricter with respect to shellfish because they can harbor bacteria and toxins. MDE is the primary authority for the Chesapeake Bay and the tidal Potomac. The VDH Division of Shellfish Safety manages these decisions within Virginia waters.

I am concerned that there could be other boulders or blockages elsewhere in the Inceptor. How can you assess for that ahead of time?

We are doing a thorough review of all sections of the interceptor and re-evaluating risks and repair schedules. Our goal is to ensure an incident like this doesn't happen again.

I am concerned that water rates are going to go up again because of this. How will you keep rates affordable and still address all of the other infrastructure that is outdated

At this time we do not anticipate any rate increases for our consumers as a result of this incident.

I am concerned that this was preventable. Why wasn't this caught earlier?

The Potomac Interceptor is a major, aging piece of underground infrastructure. We conduct inspections and maintenance, but this incident involved a structural issue that was not visible from the surface.

I am concerned that it seems that no one has been held accountable for this failure.

Our immediate priority has been stabilizing the situation, protecting public health, and addressing environmental impacts. A full technical review is underway to determine the root cause. Once that process is complete, findings will be shared and any necessary actions will follow. Accountability is part of that process, but it begins with understanding the facts.

Why should the public trust DC Water after this incident?

We understand incidents like this impact trust. From the beginning, we coordinated with EPA and other regulators, increased water quality testing, and provided regular updates. Trust is built through action, and our focus has been on response, transparency, and long-term fixes.

I am concerned about this happening again. What changes are being made to prevent this from happening again?

That's a fair question. Right now, we're doing a full review of the Interceptor system and reassessing risk across similar assets. Our goal is not just to repair this section, but to strengthen the system overall so we reduce the likelihood of a similar incident.

Were certain communities more affected by this than others?

We are working closely with regulatory and environmental agencies to assess impacts across the affected areas. Monitoring has taken place at multiple locations to ensure a clear understanding of conditions. Our commitment is to protect all communities and to ensure that response and recovery efforts are equitable and data driven.