

# NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Cameron McPherson  
804.788.1414  
[cmcpherson@hodgespart.com](mailto:cmcpherson@hodgespart.com)

## Report Shows Stalled Progress on James River Health

*James River Association's "State of the James" report gives river a grade of "C"*

**DESPITE SOME GOOD NEWS, ANTI-POLLUTION EFFORTS PROVING INSUFFICIENT**

**Richmond, Va., Nov. 30, 2011** – A biennial assessment of the health of the James River shows diminishing progress in key anti-pollution metrics which, despite encouraging progress in resurgent bald eagle and American shad populations as well as underwater grasses, downgrades the health of America's Founding River from a "C+" to a "C."

The "State of the James" report, prepared by the James River Association, measures four critical areas of the 10,000-square-mile river basin against a series of benchmarked goals: key fish and wildlife species, habitat, pollution and restoration and protection actions. Against goals in each area, generally set by the Commonwealth or other authority, the James River earned a score of 53 percent, meaning that the river is just over the halfway point to becoming fully healthy. This score represents a 4 percent decline from two years ago.

"Like a boat rowing against the tide, our efforts and investments over the past decade have only kept pace with the growing population and development," the report says. "Additional progress in reaching a fully healthy river will require a full commitment to Virginia's cleanup plan for the James River."

### **Pollution – Score 47% (down 11% in two years)**

The report found the single largest factor in inhibiting progress toward a healthier James River was pollution. While there were substantial improvements in reducing pollution in the 1990's, the past decade has shown little additional progress. Not only

do nitrogen and phosphorus continue to cause widespread damage to the river ecosystem, but progress in reducing pollution from sediment actually reversed, caused in large part by runoff from major storms.

### **Key Fish and Wildlife – Score 52% (down 3% in two years)**

The last two years continued to show growth in the number of nesting pairs of bald eagles, making America's Founding River, appropriately enough, one of the primary homes for the country's national symbol on the East Coast. Following an unexplained three-year decline, the American shad population also rebounded. But the news is not so good for oysters and brook trout, which continue to struggle at levels well below historic abundance. Rock fish and smallmouth bass also declined, demonstrating the susceptibility of even healthy populations when the river ecosystem is out of balance.

### **Habitat – Score 61% (up 1% in two years)**

Both stream health and tidal water quality saw decreases since 2009, although underwater grasses, which need clean water to get sunlight to grow, continued to rebound, and for the first time in decades were found in the main stem of the tidal James above Newport News, in addition to their strong resurgence in some tidal tributaries.

### **Restoration and Protection Actions – Score 51% (down 1% in two years)**

The Commonwealth made only incremental progress in implementing critical restoration and protection actions that are part of Virginia's overall cleanup plan for the James River. On the positive side, due to strong permit limits and hundreds of millions of dollars of investments, the objectives for wastewater treatment have been met. A similar level of effort will be needed for land-based pollution sources: agriculture and urban development. Only 23 percent of needed agricultural practices have been implemented based on information tracked by the state. Similarly progress toward controlling urban pollution currently stands at only 28 percent of goal.

Conservation of natural areas and the restoration of riparian buffers – both of which are threatened by expanding development – continued to rise, but so does the amount of land that must be protected and restored. The report notes that striking a balance between development and natural areas represents an important component in the continued progress toward improved river health.

“In marked contrast to the James River of 35 years ago, the James River is healthier today than it has been in decades, but the kind of progress we have made toward improving the health of the river is waning,” said Bill Street, executive director of the James River Association, a conservation organization working throughout the James River basin. “Unfortunately, unless we redouble our commitment to controlling pollution flowing into the James, we run the real risk of erasing the progress we have worked so hard to achieve. This report clearly identifies the areas on which we need to focus.”

### **Methodology**

For each indicator, JRA identified and compiled a key measure of health. Quantitative benchmarks have been set for what is needed to achieve a healthy James River. Current progress is compared to this benchmark to calculate a score which is averaged across the indicators in each category to determine the grade for that category. (Please note: due to refinements in the scoring, the changes do not necessarily correspond to the scores contained in the 2009 *State of the James River* report. If changes were made, the same methodology was applied to the data of the previous two years.)

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### **About the James River/JRA**

The 340-mile James River runs from its headwaters in the Appalachians into the Chesapeake Bay, making it one of the longest rivers totally contained within one state. Called “America’s Founding River” for the role it played in helping provide for the Jamestown settlers, the James River has a rich history, sustains a vibrant and diverse ecosystem and is a source of life and recreation for millions of Virginians.

The James River Association is a nonprofit conservation organization that serves as the primary “voice” of the James River, helping to ensure its health and vitality for more than 35 years.

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