

Partnering with Watershed Organizations to Produce Tributary-specific Report Cards

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Following the release of the first Chesapeake Bay report card in 2006, environmental report cards have increasingly gained popularity and recognition as a public-friendly and scientifically sound method for reporting the health of a waterway. Recently, a number of watershed organizations in the Mid-Atlantic region have begun producing their own tributary-specific report cards. In 2009, the Mid-Atlantic Tributary Assessment Coalition (MTAC) was formed to foster collaboration among participating watershed organizations and to fully develop the potential of region-specific environmental report cards. This is done in several ways: (1) by reaching consensus on realistic and meaningful ecosystem health indicators, including selection of appropriate indicators and analysis of historical and current data to determine justifiable ecological threshold levels; (2) standardization of monitoring and sampling protocols, data analysis methods, and science communication techniques; and (3) support of a broader communication strategy for dissemination of individual tributary report cards. A protocol document covering the standardization of monitoring procedures and data analysis for the six core indicators chosen by the group (dissolved oxygen, water clarity, chlorophyll a, total nitrogen, total phosphorus, and aquatic grasses), and the basics for conceptualizing and producing a report card for tidal regions was completed in early 2011, with a similar document for non-tidal regions to follow.

MTAC members represent a diverse range of ecosystems, economic and social groups, and professional backgrounds, but the group would like to expand further to incorporate more members. Currently, members include WATERKEEPERS®, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, scientists, and citizen volunteers. The types of systems represented include rivers, coastal bays, a lake, and Baltimore's Inner Harbor. The original goal of the group was to add an additional one to two members per year, but in the first two months of 2011 alone, four new groups have begun participating. Discussions have also been held amongst the group about how to standardize the collection and analysis of bacteria data, so that it may be used as an indicator in their report cards. As momentum continues to grow for MTAC, which is open to any group that wants to join whether they are currently producing a report card or not, expansion to include groups in the greater Mid-Atlantic will allow for increased collaboration and knowledge-sharing pertinent to the region.

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