

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Fairfax County is extremely grateful to the many individuals and groups who continue to support and dedicated their time and knowledge in assisting the Department of Public Works & Environmental Services (DPWES) with the Stream Protection Strategy (SPS) Baseline Study. Thanks to the general group of Stakeholders who have provided valuable input and feedback since the inception of the study in September 1998:

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<i>Sam Stribling, Ph.D.</i>	<i>TetraTech, Inc.</i>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wayne Teel
Billy Teels, Ph.D.
Keith Van Ness

Izaak Walton League, Virginia Division
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Montgomery County Watershed Management
Division

Don Waye
Cameron Wiegand
Jack White
Charles Williamson
John Wiser

Northern Virginia Regional Commission
Montgomery County Water Management Division
GKY & Associates Inc.
Virginia Department of Environmental Quality
HDR Engineering

Special thanks to the following individuals who in addition to being stakeholders, provided technical assistance as members of the Biological Monitoring Work Group (BMWG):

Todd Bolton
Jim Collins
Deana Crumbling
Kimberly Davis
Cliff Fairweather
John Galli
Claudia Hamlin-Katnik, Ph.D.
Diane Hoffman
Don Kelso, Ph.D.
John Odenkirk
Judy Okay, Ph.D.
Ed Pippin
Mark Southerland
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Fairfax County Park Authority
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Parsons Engineering Science
Audubon Naturalist Society
Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments
George Mason University
Northern Virginia Soil & Water Conservation District
George Mason University
Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries
Virginia Department of Forestry
Fairfax County Division of Environmental Health
Versar
Izaak Walton League, Virginia Division

Special thanks to the following individuals who in addition to being stakeholders, assisted with organizing citizens volunteer monitoring efforts and provided the data to be incorporated in this report:

Joanna Arciszewski
Stacey Brown
Deana Crumbling
Cliff Fairweather
Jay Gilliam
Diane Hoffman

Northern Virginia Soil & Water Conservation District
State of Virginia DEQ
Northern Virginia Soil & Water Conservation District
Audubon Naturalist Society
Izaak Walton League of America
Northern Virginia Soil & Water Conservation District

Special thanks to the following individuals who in addition to being stakeholders, assisted with peer reviewing the early draft report and provided important feedback and recommendations for the final report presentation:

Andrea Ceisler
Jim Collins

Northern Virginia Soil & Water Conservation District
Tetra Tech, Inc.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Cliff Fairweather
John Galli
Noel Kaplan
Don Kelso, Ph.D.
Judy Okay, Ph.D.
Fernando Pasquel
Jack White*

*Audubon Naturalist Society
Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments
Fairfax County Department of Planning and Zoning
George Mason University
Virginia Department of Forestry
CH2M Hill
GKY & Associates Inc.*

Special thanks to the following who rendered special assistance in a number of essential capacities:

*Volunteer Stream Monitors
Janet Hubbell
Elaine Schaeffer
Tara Willey
Fairfax County Print Shop
Fairfax County GIS Branch
George Mason University
Prince William Forest Park
Cameron Wiegand
Keith Van Ness
Randy Sewell
Rebecca Robinson
Dave Maher
Tim Whiteley
Jack Chilton and Jack White
Kevin Brittingham
New York State DEC
Mike Barbour, Ph.D.
Bill Hilsenhoff, Ph.D.
Roger Buck
Dan Featherhoff & Paul Obst
Stuart Finley and Ken Kopka
Tetra Tech, Inc.
Versar
Reese Voshell, Ph.D.*

*supplemental data
assistance with coordinating outreach
lab space at Noman C. Cole LPPCP
initial study planning and field work
assistance with printing
technical assistance with GIS
equipment, people, advice
allowing us to sample the reference sites
guidance through the planning stages of study
guidance through the planning stages of study
help with ICEM and development of data sheets
field and database assistance
field and volunteer assistance
field assistance
providing historical stormwater information
assistance with chironomid identification
permission to use fish images
information on ecoregions
information on tolerance values
help with logistics at lab
safety training
Lake Barcroft photos and information
technical advice
data sharing
Virginia Tech Department of Entomology, insect pictures*

Fairfax County Department of Public Works & Environmental Services (DPWES) Staff:

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Scott St. Clair
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(SWMB)*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SPS Team:

Amy Maher, Matt Handy, Andy May, Shannon Curtis and Chad Grupe

Others:

*Dipmani Kumar, Matthew Meyers, Russell Smith, Savita Schlesinger and
Ronald Kirkpatrick*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	ES - 1
CHAPTER 1	
Introduction	1 - 1
Purpose of Stream Protection Strategy (SPS)	1 - 1
Background of SPS	1 - 2
Study Goals	1 - 3
Study Objectives	1 - 4
Overall County Water Quality Goals	1 - 4
Evolution of Stormwater Management	1 - 5
Effects of Urbanization	1 - 8
Importance of Biological Monitoring	1 - 11
CHAPTER 2	
Methods	2 - 1
Site Selection	2 - 1
Benthic Macroinvertebrate Sampling	2 - 3
Fish Sampling	2 - 5
Habitat Assessment	2 - 6
Stream Morphology	2 - 7
Other Field Sampling	2 - 8
Spatial Analysis	2 - 8
Countywide Stream Ranking System: Andrews Curves	2 - 9
Management Categories	2 - 10
Watershed Protection	2 - 11
Watershed Restoration Level I	2 - 11
Watershed Restoration Level II	2 - 11
Volunteer Monitoring	2 - 12
CHAPTER 3	
Watershed Summaries	3 - 1
Sugarland Run Watershed Group Summary	3 - 5
Upper Potomac Watershed Group Summary	3 - 15
Difficult Run Watershed Summary	3 - 23
Middle Potomac Watershed Group Summary	3 - 35
Pimmit Run Watershed Summary	3 - 43
Cameron Run Watershed Group Summary	3 - 51
Lower Potomac Watershed Group Summary	3 - 61
Accotink Creek Watershed Summary	3 - 71
Pohick Creek Watershed Summary	3 - 79
Upper Bull Run Watershed Group Summary	3 - 89
Lower Bull Run Watershed Group Summary	3 - 99
Popes Head Creek Watershed Summary	3 - 107
Upper Occoquan Watershed Group Summary	3 - 115
Lower Occoquan Watershed Group Summary	3 - 125
Health Department Monitoring	3 - 135

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 4		
Watershed Improvement Strategies	4 - 1	
Watershed Management Categories	4 - 1	
Watershed Protection Area	4 - 1	
Watershed Restoration – Level I	4 - 3	
Watershed Restoration – Level II	4 - 4	
Comprehensive Watershed Management Approach	4 - 6	
Watershed Prioritization	4 - 6	
Watershed Master Planning	4 - 6	
Programmatic Changes	4 - 7	
Citizen Involvement and Education	4 - 8	
Stream Monitoring Plans	4 - 8	
Stream Assessment	4 - 8	
Site Development Practices	4 - 8	
Ecologically Friendly Design Concept	4 - 9	
Innovative BMP's	4 - 9	
Low-Impact Development Design (LID)	4 - 9	
Ecosystem-based Process	4 - 9	
Other Stormwater Management Practices	4 - 10	
Other Environmental Initiatives	4 - 11	
Watershed Management/Master Plans	4 - 11	
Chesapeake 2000 Agreement	4 - 12	
National Pollutant Discharge Elimination Systems (NPDES)	4 - 13	
Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs)	4 - 13	
Fairfax County's Policy Plan (Environmental Section)	4 - 14	
Citizens Volunteer Stream Monitoring	4 - 15	
Amendments to Public Facilities Manual (PFM)	4 - 15	
Stormwater Environmental Utility Implementation	4 - 16	
Virginia Riparian Buffer Initiative	4 - 17	
CHAPTER 5		
Summary and Recommendations	5 - 1	
Future Assessment Recommendations		5 - 6
Spatial Analysis	5 - 6	
Long Term Monitoring	5 - 6	
Visual Assessments	5 - 7	
Fish Community Metrics	5 - 7	
Volunteer Monitoring Efforts	5 - 7	
Stream Network Assessment	5 - 8	
Instream Sediment Studies	5 - 8	
Study Design Modifications	5 - 8	
Stormwater Controls Effectiveness	5 - 8	
Impervious Cover	5 - 9	
Wetland Monitoring	5 - 9	
Inter-Agency Cooperation	5 - 9	
Promoting Public Awareness	5 - 9	

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LITERATURE CITED	LC - 1
GLOSSARY	G - 1
APPENDICES – Available on CD-ROM upon request (phone: 703 324-5500)	
Protocols	
Database	

Note: A downloadable form of this document (Adobe Acrobat .pdf file) and the appendices will be available on the SPS web page in Spring 2001. Use the address below and click on the link to the Stream Protection Strategy.

<http://www.co.fairfax.va.us/dpwes/>

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

The purpose of this report is to provide a baseline summary of general stream conditions across Fairfax County. This document does NOT contain any additions or amendments to County policy. Rather, it is intended for use as a planning tool by County policy makers and to serve as a reference point for future study. This report highlights the need for further investigation in many areas throughout the County.

If you encounter a problem pertaining to a County stream, please refer to the County's Environmental Services Directory at the following web address:

http://www.co.fairfax.va.us/gov/dpwes/environmental/environmental_concerns.htm

Alternatively, you can call the County Environmental Hotline at (703) 324-1937.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Prior to the 1940's, Fairfax County was largely rural and agricultural. Since that time, the landscape has been transformed into one dominated by suburban communities interspersed with highly developed urban centers. This shift from natural, vegetative ground cover to areas of impervious surface dramatically increases rainfall runoff and stream flow volumes during storm events. Rather than infiltrating the soil as it would under natural conditions, rainwater instead flows rapidly from rooftops, parking lots, and roadways, and is quickly directed toward streams via a conveyance system of roadside gutters, ditches, and storm sewer drains. The resulting high flows rapidly erode the channel of the receiving stream, leading to degradation of the entire downstream environment.

The need to protect the living environment while planning for orderly development and redevelopment of the County has long been recognized. There is a direct link between the vitality of ecological resources and the quality of life for citizens. Streams beginning in Fairfax County eventually flow into the Potomac River and then enter the Chesapeake Bay, and the measures taken by the County to improve stream quality within its boundaries have also been aimed at protecting the downstream environment.

However, despite the efforts taken over the years to mitigate the effects of increasing urbanization, stream degradation continues within the ecosystem. This degradation is evident through increasing stream channel erosion, loss of riparian buffers, decreased aquatic life and poor water quality in general within the County's streams. The purpose of the Stream Protection Strategy (SPS) program is to:

- Understand the degree of stream degradation.
- Formulate measures to effectively reverse the negative trends.
- Identify and prioritize areas with the greatest needs.
- Recommend streams for preservation and restoration efforts where appropriate.
- Support detailed comprehensive watershed planning or stormwater master plans from which specific capital improvements may evolve.
- Integrate applicable environmental policies, initiatives and regulatory requirements.
- Provide an additional information base to aid future planning efforts.
- Encourage environmental stewardship by supporting established and new citizen stream monitoring programs and public education.

In general, objectives of the program focused on recommendations for protection and restoration activities on a subwatershed basis, prioritization of areas for allocation of limited resources, establishment of a framework for long-term stream quality monitoring, and support for overall watershed management. Although high counts of fecal coliform bacteria are recognized as a serious health risk in some County streams, the focus of this baseline study was on biological indicators of stream water quality. Fecal coliform bacteria counts are the subject of continual monitoring by the Fairfax County Health

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Department. These results are published in a separate annual report (refer to the **1999 Stream Water Quality Report**), sections of which are described in Chapter 3, under Other Monitoring.

Fairfax County's SPS program currently supports several ongoing environmental initiatives at the County, State and Federal levels, all of which assist in achieving the goal of preservation and restoration of stream quality. Over time, SPS will become even more integrated with the following programs:

- Watershed management/master plans
- Chesapeake 2000 Agreement implementation
- National Pollutant Discharge Elimination Systems (NPDES)
- Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs)
- Fairfax County's Policy Plan (Environmental Section)
- Citizens Volunteer Stream Monitoring
- Amendments to Public Facilities Manual (PFM), including the Infill and Residential Development Study recommendations
- Stormwater Environmental Utility implementation
- Virginia Riparian Buffer Initiative – Chesapeake Bay Program

A detailed description of the above programs/initiatives and their linkage to SPS is outlined in Chapter 4 of this report.

The results of this SPS Baseline Study are not aimed at restricting new development but to provide the basis for more ecologically sensitive and sustainable new development and redevelopment countywide. Detailed goals and objectives are stated in Chapter 1 of this report.

Methods

The field component of this assessment involved the collection of detailed biological and habitat data from 138 stream sites/reaches, 13 of which were established as Quality Assurance/Quality Control (QA/QC) Sites. Of the 125 principal monitoring sites, 114 were reflective of conditions within Fairfax County and 11 were sampling locations in nearby Prince William Forest Park and used to aid in the development of "reference" conditions to which all sites were compared. This report presents the results of a comprehensive baseline study of conditions as they existed in 1999. These results can be utilized to formulate recommendations for strategies to consider in overall management of watersheds to preserve or restore stream quality to levels consistent with County environmental goals and applicable state and federal mandates.

With its emphasis on biological monitoring, the SPS program is an important first step toward improving environmental quality by viewing streams as more than mere conduits of stormwater flow. By tying together information on stream morphology, habitat condition, water chemistry, and current and projected land use patterns, it will provide

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

an important base for the planning and decision-making framework that will be needed to protect and restore stream ecosystems within Fairfax County.

Research shows that at levels of 10-20% impervious surface cover, habitat quality and biological integrity in stream systems is significantly diminished (Klein, 1979, Booth, 1991, Schueler et al, 1992, Booth et al, 1993, Booth and Jackson, 1994 and Boward et al, 1999). Using modified versions of the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency's (U.S.EPA's) Rapid Bioassessment Protocols, the baseline study focused on assessments of channel morphology and the responses of living communities (aquatic insects and fish) to aspects of land use. Spatial analyses of development patterns and watershed imperviousness were conducted within a Geographic Information System (GIS) environment. Details of the methodology and protocols used for the study are outlined in Chapter 2 and Appendix A-H of this report.

A numeric ranking of overall quality was generated for each of the SPS monitoring sites within the County. Each of these ratings was based upon the numeric scores of the following four components of stream/watershed condition:

- 1) an Index of Biotic Integrity (IBI) incorporating 10 separate measures (each score on a 0 to 10 scale) of benthic macroinvertebrate (insect) community integrity (Figure I),
- 2) a general evaluation of the localized watershed features (including vegetation and instream features) as well as a more specific evaluation of 10 habitat parameters, each scored on a scale of 0 (worst condition) to 20 (optimal condition) of in-stream and riparian zone conditions (Figure II),
- 3) fish taxa richness (number of distinct species present) (Figure III), and
- 4) calculations of overall percent impervious cover within the contributing drainage area of each site based upon available Fairfax County GIS data layers (roads, parking lots, buildings, sidewalks) (Figure IV).

The ultimate numeric score for each sampling location reflects the site's degree of departure from reference or "highest-quality" conditions. These composite values were then assigned to one of the following qualitative categories: **Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor and Very Poor.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

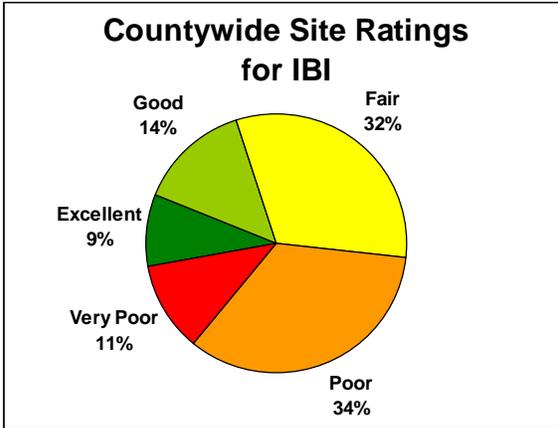


Figure I. Percentage of SPS monitoring sites scoring in each of the five IBI quality categories.

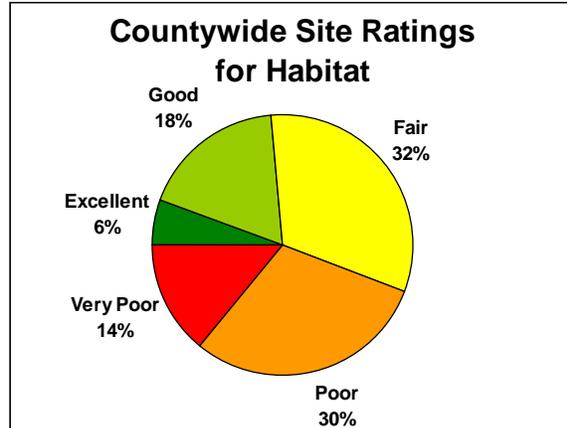


Figure II. Percentage of SPS monitoring sites scoring in each of the five Habitat quality categories.

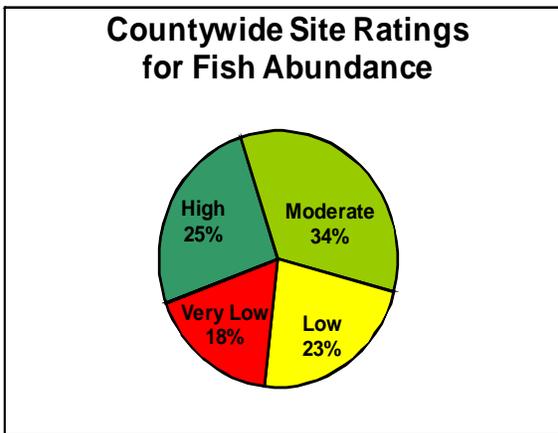


Figure III. Percentage of SPS monitoring sites scoring in each of the four Fish abundance categories.

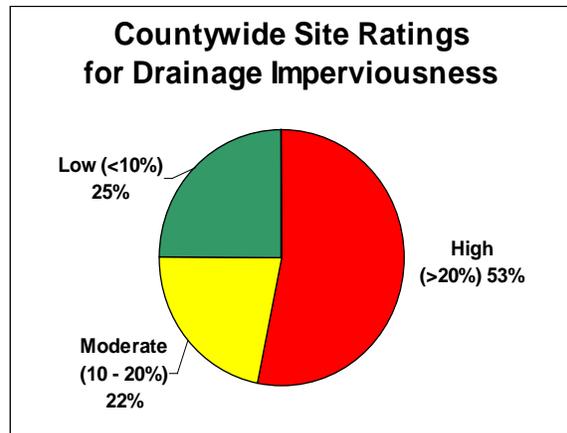


Figure IV. Distribution of Imperviousness at SPS monitoring sites.

RESULTS

Management category recommendations were made based upon both this overall ranking as well as *potential* levels of future development (based on current zoning information) within each respective subwatershed (Figure V). These categories are as follows (value in parenthesis is the percentage of the County falling within each grouping):

Watershed Protection (31.5% of County)

Primary goal: Preserve biological integrity by taking measures to identify and protect, to the extent possible, the conditions responsible for current high quality rating of these streams.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Example Key Management Strategies:

- Consider establishing a zoning overlay to clearly identify these areas as watershed protection areas.
- Evaluate and refine, as needed, existing County regulations and policies to assure continued protection of these watersheds.
- Assess current watershed conditions to identify characteristics and management practices that contribute to the high water quality rating.
- Expand stream valley park acquisition or dedication.
- Conduct public education programs on stream stewardship.

Watershed Restoration Level I (7.2% of County)

Primary Goal: Re-establish healthy biological communities, where feasible, by taking measures to identify and remedy the cause(s) of stream degradation both broad scale and site specific.

Example Key Management Strategies:

- Evaluate, prioritize and construct planned Capital Improvement Projects (CIP) for these watersheds including planned regional ponds and water quality BMP retrofits.
- Evaluate, prioritize and construct stream corridor restoration projects for these watersheds.
- Promote use of innovative BMPs and Low Impact Development Design (LID) techniques.
- Conduct public education programs on stream stewardship.

Watershed Restoration Level II (61.3% of County)

Primary Goal: Maintain areas to prevent further degradation and implement measures to improve water quality to comply with Chesapeake Bay Initiatives, Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) regulations and other water quality initiatives and standards.

Example Key Management Strategies:

- Implement a watershed approach to evaluate and prioritize restoration in these subwatersheds. Focus on restoring tributaries and headwaters prior to active restoration in mainstem segments.
- Select sites and implement monitoring of tributaries identified as “Assessment Priority Areas”.
- Identify, prioritize and implement projects to help stabilize critical areas with severe stream bank erosion.
- Identify and prioritize potential stormwater management retrofit opportunities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Promote use of innovative BMPs and reduction of imperviousness for infill and redevelopment.
- Conduct public education in stream stewardship.
- Promote programs like Adopt-A-Stream to increase public involvement.

Many of the key management strategies such as public outreach and promotion of low-impact development techniques have applications in all three watershed management categories. These management strategies will need to be integrated into a comprehensive watershed management approach on a countywide and subwatershed level. Countywide management strategies include prioritizing the 14 watershed groups, implementing watershed master planning, improving stream protection policies and promoting citizen involvement. Individual watershed management strategies include setting priorities for subwatersheds within a given watershed, defining additional stream monitoring needs and eventually implementing selected stream restoration projects. These strategies will need to be further developed into a comprehensive plan for stream protection and restoration.

These categories are intended for use only as planning level tools. Each category is characterized by a set of goals and strategy recommendations that best suit the respective stream environments given current subwatershed development patterns, likely future imperviousness and the assessments of biological condition detailed in this report. In addition, management categories are not intended to be a means of controlling development or to be confused with adopted land use categories contained within the County's Comprehensive Land Use Plan, or other land use documents currently guided by the County Ordinance. Rather, management categories propose a new technique to group targeted areas that might be recommended for similar treatment for more effective future watershed protection, preservation and restoration efforts. Actual implementation of the recommended treatment might entail more detailed study through watershed master plans and/or necessitate a re-examination of some existing policies and plans through a different process.

Chapter 3 contains detailed watershed by watershed descriptions, summary of conditions by both County staff's and volunteer groups' monitoring data and designated management category recommendations with watershed strategies. Some of these strategies, by themselves, represent established steps and initiatives currently being implemented in the County and neighboring jurisdictions. However, SPS attempts to organize these strategies in a more logical manner to foster a more effective watershed planning and management approach. The strategies outlined in this report by no means represent an all inclusive list; rather they will serve as the foundation of a process to identify potential strategies that may require further evaluation for applicability on a sub-watershed scale.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Countywide Management

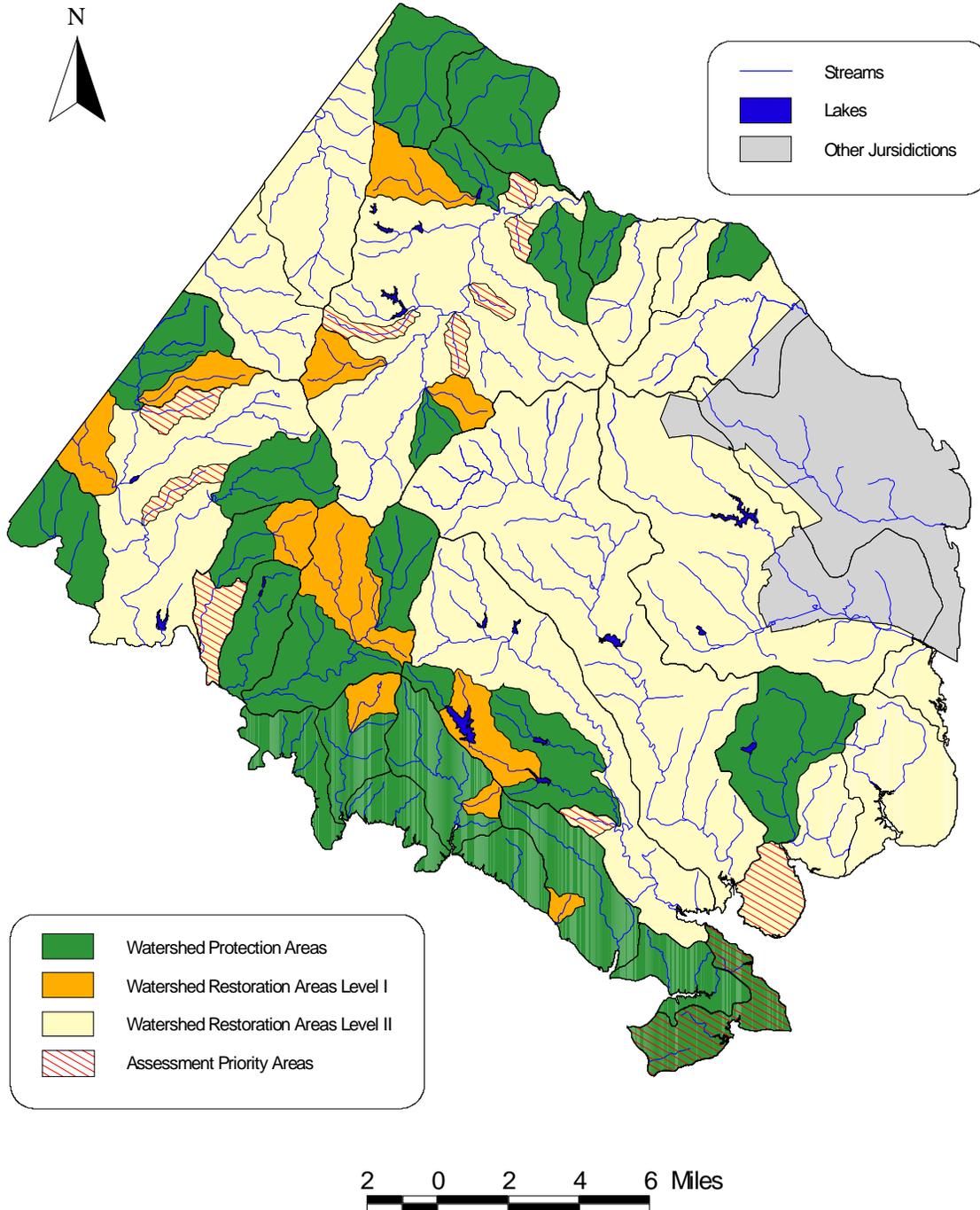


Figure V. Management recommendations for Fairfax County watersheds.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

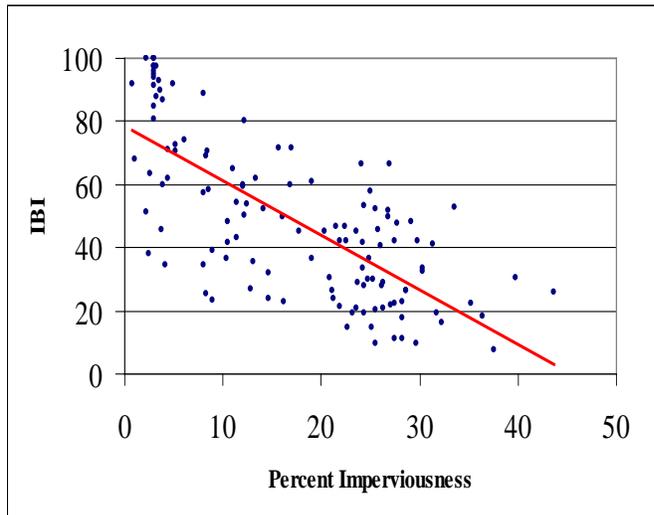


Figure VI. Trend line indicating that Biological integrity, as measured by an Index of Biotic Integrity (IBI) for benthic macroinvertebrates, generally decreases with increasing percent imperviousness. Appendix B includes information on the statistical significance of the data presented.

Consistent with what has been reported in the literature (Klein, 1979, Booth, 1991, Schueler et al, 1992, Booth et al, 1993, Booth and Jackson, 1994 and Boward et al, 1999) this study showed a statistically significant relationship between drainage area imperviousness and biological quality at a site (see Appendix B for details on the statistical analyses). Figure VI shows this relationship. The trend line shown in the figure is presented to highlight the fact that impervious area generated during development correlates with declining stream quality as measured by macroinvertebrate community health. However, the relationship in its current form (linear) should not be used for predictive purposes since that would require a more detailed statistical analysis.

The systems of high biological and habitat integrity that still exist within the County's boundaries are typically found only in largely undeveloped watersheds. Conversely, the most degraded streams are those that flow through areas of the most intense development (Figure VII). This pattern is even more pronounced in drainages containing older developments that often lack the more recently developed and sometimes more efficient stormwater controls.

Protecting and restoring stream quality within Fairfax will require a diverse management approach that includes an active and ongoing stream monitoring effort, targeted restoration activities, public education, enhanced stormwater controls, and enhanced channels of communication with the development community. Some of these steps have already commenced or are the subject of recommendations in the most recent draft of the Infill & Residential Development Study. This baseline study should be seen as only the beginning phase of a permanent monitoring effort that will be needed for effective management of aquatic resources within the County. If appropriate decisions are to be made, trends in stream conditions will need to be identified and assessed over the long term. This is absolutely essential in meeting the requirements and challenges of the new Chesapeake Bay 2000 Agreement and a potential bay-wide TMDL after 2010 (see Chapter 4 for details). This will require expanding our base of understanding of streams. Components of any future SPS program should involve:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Monitoring of existing SPS sites on a rotating basis involving 20-25% of the County annually.
- Establishing a detailed visual assessment program at the subwatershed level.
- Assessing variables influencing fish community composition and distribution.
- Promoting the expansion of volunteer monitoring efforts.
- Defining and identifying perennial stream network within the County.
- Assessing relative contribution of various sources of instream sediment.
- Evaluating alternate site selection design to allow for more rigorous analyses.
- Assisting with assessments of effectiveness of various BMP technologies.
- Reassessing periodically imperviousness at the watershed and subwatershed levels.
- Improving inter-agency cooperation regarding sediment control implementation and maintenance.
- Promoting public education that fosters community interest in stream quality issues.

More detailed recommendations are discussed in Chapter 5 of this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Countywide Conditions

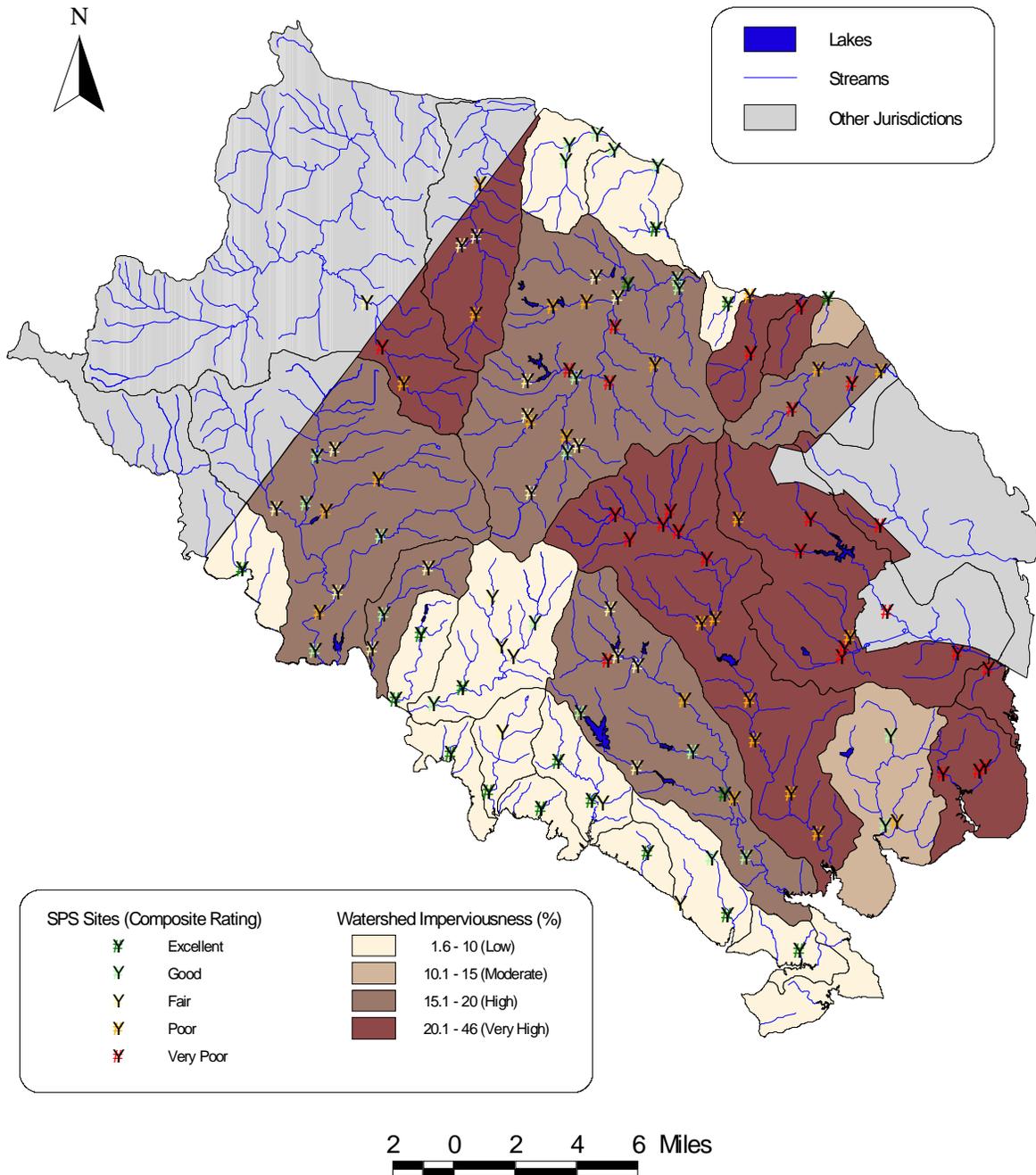


Figure VII. Relationship between imperviousness and overall stream condition.