

3. WATER

Board of Supervisors Environmental Vision:

“Fairfax County considers the protection, restoration and enhancement of environmental quality through the sustainable management of its water resources to be one of its highest priorities. Through its policies, regulations, and outreach to the community, the county will implement the best available technology, including advanced and innovative practices to protect and restore streams, wetlands and associated aquatic resources, promote water conservation and ensure the most effective stormwater management, advanced wastewater treatment, and the safest, most reliable drinking water supply for future generations.”

Introduction

Fairfax County’s 30 watersheds encompass over 900 miles of perennial streams along with myriad wetlands, tidal marshes, lakes, ponds, reservoirs, and riparian corridors. All of Fairfax County ultimately drains to the Potomac River, which drains to Chesapeake Bay. While the natural world does not draw distinct lines for water movement throughout the ecosystem, human management of water does fall into three separate management systems:

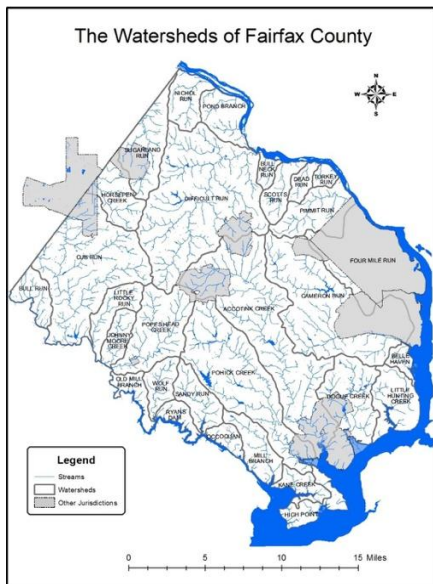
1. **Drinking water** – We obtain water from surface waters and groundwater and then treat the raw water to drinking water standards.
2. **Wastewater** – We collect and treat sewage from homes and business to return it to surface waters or groundwater.
3. **Stormwater** – Stormwater (runoff) management includes protecting homes and infrastructure from flooding, and maintaining/restoring streams, ponds, lakes, and tidal and freshwater wetlands to ecologically healthy systems.

Figure 3-1. Watersheds of Fairfax County [\(A more detailed map is available online.\)](#)

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4.

I - DRINKING WATER

The majority of the county's drinking water is provided by [Fairfax Water](#). About two-thirds comes from the Potomac River and one-third from Occoquan Reservoir. For a small number of residents, community wells and private wells provide drinking water.

EQAC believes that, overall, Fairfax County has an adequate supply of good quality drinking water. Like everyone else in the U.S., we need to keep a wary eye on new and emerging contaminants that may need further treatment. The more local Occoquan supply in particular bears watching because of threats to its quality and quantity.

Current Concerns

Water Quality of the Potomac River and Occoquan Reservoir Supplies

[Fairfax Water](#) withdraws water from the Potomac River near the James J. Corbalis Water Treatment Plant and from the Occoquan Reservoir at the Frederick F. Griffith Water Treatment Plant. Fairfax Water [meets or surpasses](#) all state and federal regulations.

According to [Fairfax Water's Statement on EPA's Final Poly- and Perfluoroalkyl Substances \(PFAS\) Standards for Drinking Water](#), released April 10, 2024, Potomac water from the Corbalis plant is below (i.e., meets) the standards while the Occoquan water from the Griffith plant is slightly above standards. The standards do not take immediate effect, but Fairfax Water is evaluating treatment processes to ensure that our water will meet these

standards. **STATUS: Control measures for PFAS still are uncertain, but EQAC supports continuing studies and sampling.**

Minimum Flows

Fairfax County and neighboring jurisdictions store only a few days of local supplies of water, and thus rely on a continuous (“run of the river”) flow of Potomac River water from upstream sources and reservoirs. The lack of large dams is cost-effective and good for the ecology of the Potomac River, but can present some challenges during droughts. Major water systems in the Washington, D.C. region interconnect to some extent and have worked under cooperative agreements since 1982¹. The [Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin](#) (ICPRB) has the mission to protect and enhance the waters and related resources of the Potomac River basin through science, regional cooperation, and education. The ICPRB produces a [water supply reliability study every five years](#). The 2020 report indicated there is no immediate concern of water shortages, but by 2040 some regional actions may be needed. **STATUS: Fairfax Water coordinates with the ICPRB; EQAC recognizes this coordination is critical and recommends it continue.**

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Occoquan Reservoir

The Occoquan Watershed covers about 590 square miles and includes the Occoquan Reservoir, which serves as the boundary between Fairfax and Prince William counties. Unlike the vastly larger Potomac Watershed, the Occoquan water supply is very susceptible to pollutants introduced in local jurisdictions.

Current concerns for the Occoquan Reservoir include:

- The effect of recent PFAS regulations and revisions (see [Fairfax Water notes on PFAS](#));
- Control of salinity in Occoquan water (see discussion below on data centers and the [Fairfax Water notes on PFAS](#));
- Planned development in the Prince William County part of the watershed.

Revisions to Fairfax County’s Comprehensive Plan appear to be on track to continue protections for Fairfax County’s part (17%) of the Occoquan watershed. The [Occoquan Watershed Monitoring Laboratory \(OWML\)](#) is proposing a modeling effort to better understand the impacts of development on the Occoquan Reservoir.

STATUS:

¹ Sheer, Daniel P., 1985, “Managing Water Supplies to Increase Water Availability.” In *National Water Summary 1985 – Hydrologic Events and Surface-Water Resources*, [U.S. Geological Water-Supply Paper 2300](#), pp. 101-123. DOI: 10.3133/wsp2300.

- Water-Quality modeling efforts for the Occoquan Reservoir still are in planning stages, but EQAC supports efforts to better understand the reservoir.
- EQAC commends the decision to continue protections for the Occoquan watershed, especially as it puts Fairfax County in a good position to advocate for protecting the remaining 83% of the watershed.

Wells and Groundwater Monitoring

As the County continues to urbanize, groundwater supplies will come under increasing stress. There are approximately 15,000 family residences and businesses that are served by individual well water supplies in Fairfax County. The Fairfax County Health Department offers private well evaluations, and the application [can be accessed on the county's website](#). The Virginia State Health Department Office of Drinking Water regulates the 44 public well water supplies in Fairfax County. The operators of these systems are required to conduct quarterly water sampling and analysis. On January 1, 2014, the [Eastern Virginia Groundwater Management Area was expanded](#) to include the areas of Fairfax County located east of Interstate 95.

STATUS: There is no indication of any regional problem in groundwater so far, but EQAC believes continuing monitoring efforts are prudent.

Data Center Impacts on Water Supplies

According to a recent Wall Street Journal Report², roughly 250 existing data centers in Northern Virginia use about 4,000 MW of electric power, and another 7,000 MW could be added. Adding 7,000 MW of capacity using evaporative cooling would introduce about 70 mgd of consumptive water use, almost doubling existing consumptive water uses in the Potomac River Basin. This still is small relative to normal flows, but not necessarily during droughts. **None of this increased usage is included in the 2020 ICPRB estimates.**

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All evaporative cooling systems concentrate any solids in the input water and must discharge highly saline "blowdown" water. This is particularly worrisome in the Occoquan basin, where sodium levels already are of concern.

At present, it is not known if new data centers actually will request water for evaporative cooling, but it will help to have a policy in place.

STATUS: The recommendation below was included in the 2024 ARE, but no action was taken. It is be cited by the Sierra Club as an example of good policy.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION 3A-W-2024.3: Fairfax County should enact a policy that, if large data centers are approved with evaporative cooling, approval conditions should consider (1) Possible water cutoff during periods of

² Wall Street Journal, April 15, 2024, "AI Is Fueling a Data Center Boom. Can the Power Grid Keep Up?:"

drought; (2) Use of recycled wastewater where feasible; and (3) No return of any “blowdown” to the Occoquan Reservoir.

II – WASTEWATER

Nearly all wastewater in Fairfax County is collected from homes and commercial sites and carried through the county-maintained sanitary sewer pipe system to one of five advanced regional treatment facilities in the region. [A digital map of facilities and service areas is online.](#) The Fairfax County [Department of Public Works and Environmental Services](#) manages the collection and treatment of wastewater. An overview of wastewater treatment can be found [here](#).

Current Concerns

Funding for Wastewater Management.

EQAC recognizes Fairfax County is served by an excellent wastewater conveyance and treatment infrastructure. However, we must not rest on our laurels. Facilities will require continued maintenance and upgrades as they age, and hiring qualified staff remains a continuing challenge.

The [Wastewater Management Program](#) within the county is managed as an enterprise fund which means the fees collected for hookups and for service fund the system. Most fees are collected as part of customers’ water bills. The Board of Supervisors sets the fee rate. In December 2024, Raftelis Financial Consultants, Inc. completed a study of the sufficiency of the existing and adopted wastewater rates and availability charge revenues for the Wastewater Management Program: [Wastewater Rate Study for Fiscal Year 2025 Through Fiscal Year 2030](#).

STATUS: EQAC believes the Raftelis study provides a sound basis for setting appropriate wastewater fees.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION 3B-W-2021.1: Set the fee rate collected for wastewater treatment to meet the documented (Raftelis Financial Consultants, Inc., December 2024) needs of the necessary upgrades and maintenance requirements for all the plants that serve the county and their respective wastewater collection system, including increases to hire and retain adequate wastewater personnel.

Pretreatment Program

Fairfax County has an effective and enforceable [pretreatment program](#) to protect the county’s wastewater collection, conveyance, and treatment infrastructure, and to prevent certain pollutants from passing through the wastewater treatment facilities to receiving waters. The pretreatment program is in full compliance with all applicable requirements.

STATUS: No additional action is recommended.

Septic Systems and On-site Disposal

Over 21,000 homes and businesses are served by on-site sewage disposal systems in Fairfax County. About 5% of these systems are alternative sewage disposal systems, which require more extensive maintenance than conventional systems. All septic systems are required to be pumped out every five years. The operation and maintenance of all [onsite sewage disposal facilities](#) is regulated by the county's Health Department. Permits are issued for residents to utilize pump and haul because of a failing on-site sewage disposal system.

Areas of the county that have been deemed unbuildable in the past (due to the inability of the property to support a conventional septic system) are now being considered for development using [alternative on-site sewage disposal technology](#). To ensure these complex systems are functional for a long time, educational outreach to homeowners is critical. Outreach can be provided by both the private and public sectors, to include Fairfax County Health Department and Department of Public Works and Environmental Services.

STATUS: EQAC supports continuing aggressive education and monitoring of new alternate septic systems performance.

Upper Occoquan Service Authority (UOSA)

UOSA is an independent authority that operates an advanced water reclamation facility in Centreville, Virginia and serves the western portions of Fairfax and Prince William counties, as well as the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park. UOSA's [Drinking the Water](#) video shows individuals comfortably drinking the treated water from the plant and showcases the high degree of treatment. This system was one of the early pioneers of indirect potable reuse in the country. UOSA discharges upstream of the Occoquan Reservoir. UOSA continues to meet its performance criteria. Additional information can be found on the [UOSA website](#). The Director of the Wastewater Planning and Monitoring Division at Fairfax County serves as the chair of the UOSA Board. The Occoquan Reservoir is discussed in the Drinking Water section above.

STATUS: EQAC has no specific recommendations regarding UOSA at this time.

III - STORMWATER

Introduction

As development and redevelopment occurs, natural areas that once had vegetative cover capable of absorbing water and filtering pollutants are replaced by impervious surfaces. With no chance to infiltrate into the ground, and with surfaces often designed to minimize

water retention, increased runoff flows into streams more quickly. Most watersheds in Fairfax County now are considered “urban,” with greater than 10 percent impervious area.

First and foremost, runoff must be prevented from endangering life or causing damage to built-up property. However, urban runoff also typically contains water-quality pollutants: excessive nutrients, including nitrogen and phosphorus; sediment; salts from winter deicing; toxics; pathogens including bacteria; and litter. In addition to local impacts, loadings of these pollutants to Chesapeake Bay must be reduced.

Responsibility for controlling runoff falls upon several entities:

- The county (DPWES) maintains the public storm drainage system contained within dedicated storm drainage easements.
- Numerous private systems are the responsibility of private property owners, including driveway culverts and bridges that cross public drainage systems.
- The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) maintains the storm systems in public street rights-of-way³.
- Storm systems on land owned by other public bodies such as the Fairfax County Park Authority, Fairfax County Public Schools and the federal government are maintained by those entities⁴.

Current Concerns

Monitoring Streams and Lakes – What do we know?

Several stream monitoring programs are ongoing within Fairfax County and county streams have been the subject of several studies.

The Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES) manages web pages describing its [Stream Quality Assessment Program](#), providing an excellent description of the DPWES efforts, along with current links to other cooperative monitoring efforts. Monitoring results indicate the following key points about the quality of Fairfax County streams:

- In 2024, almost half (47.5%) of Fairfax County’s streams were considered in “very poor” to “poor” condition; that is, they are impaired and lack biological diversity.
- County streams have shown a slight improvement since 2004, when the current monitoring program began. Although the changes have been relatively minor, it is important to note that they have occurred against a backdrop of continued urbanization and population growth.

³ [VDOT has its own system](#) for designing and maintaining facilities. As the County has little direct control over VDOT practices, VDOT facilities are discussed only briefly towards the end of this chapter.

⁴ Activities of these agencies may be discussed in other chapters of this Annual Report on the Environment.

- Based upon the [DPWES Bacteria Monitoring Program](#), recreational direct contact with surface waters is discouraged.

Since 2014, four large, county-managed water control impoundments in the [Pohick Creek watershed](#) have been monitored by DPWES. By monitoring the lakes over time, it has been shown that dissolved oxygen concentrations strongly stratify during the growing season, and that dredging can lower nutrient, chlorophyll, and suspended solid concentrations (in the water column) but that these concentrations tend to trend back up over time, post dredging.

The Reston Association (RA), the homeowner's association for the planned community of Reston, has an active watershed and lake management program. Four lakes, Audubon, Anne, Thoreau, and Newport, as well as two ponds, Bright and Butler, are monitored. Information about Reston's lakes can be obtained from [its Lake Report](#). RA evaluates control methods of aquatic plants and algae from both a budget and ecological impact standpoint.

[Lake Accotink](#) has been impaired by sedimentation and plant growth. A [task force has been formed](#), and [a preservation feasibility study has been initiated](#).

STATUS:

- EQAC believes current stream monitoring efforts present an accurate picture of stream conditions within Fairfax County, and recommends these efforts be continued.
- While no recommendation concerning Lake Accotink is appropriate at this point, EQAC will continue to follow this activity.

Flooding

DPWES is very active in both [providing information](#) and in constructing, monitoring, and maintaining facilities to alleviate/prevent flooding. [Coastal flooding is a concern for communities along the tidal Potomac River](#). The communities of Belle Haven and New Alexandria are particularly vulnerable. DPWES operates and maintains two flood control measures in the Belle Haven area: the New Alexandria Tide Gate and the New Alexandria Pump Station. These provide only a limited amount of flood protection.

Over the next century, precipitation events are expected to become more intense, which is predicted to lead to more frequent flooding. The strategies in the [Resilient Fairfax plan](#) address the issues of both floodplains and urban flooding. The work to address documented structural flood risk is important as climate change, deteriorated county infrastructure, and nearby development with imperious surface may affect flood risks to at-risk properties.

STATUS: EQAC supports additional funding and new staff positions to support Resilient Fairfax strategies for floodplains and urban flooding.

Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Action Plans

Fairfax County has developed [comprehensive watershed management plans](#) for each of the county's 30 watersheds. These are grouped into 11 major watershed management plan documents. As part of the Chesapeake Bay drainage, Fairfax County is subject to the [Chesapeake Bay TMDL Action Plan](#). TMDLs establish the maximum amount of pollutants a water body can receive while still meeting water quality standards. This results in a number of specific TMDL plans for Fairfax County:

- [Bacteria TMDL Action Plan](#)
- [PCB TMDL Action Plan](#)
- [Sediment TMDL Action Plan](#)

TMDL compliance ultimately is enforced by the County's [Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System \(MS4\) Permit](#). The permit was reissued on January 4, 2024 and expires January 3, 2029. The Annual Report goes into great detail concerning planning, implementation, monitoring, and reporting.

STATUS: EQAC believes DPWES has Fairfax County in compliance with TMDL requirements, and no specific action (other than financing, discussed below) is recommended at this time.

Public Outreach

A large element of controlling runoff and nonpoint pollution is best done at the source, which often involves private landowners. DPWES has a [number of programs](#) for educating the public in properly handling runoff and in reducing nonpoint pollution. Some of these programs include: properly designing and maintaining private facilities, respecting [Resource Protection Areas \(RPA's\)](#); and [changing common behaviors](#) to avoid pollution.

STATUS: EQAC believes a well-informed public is critical for stormwater management efforts, and supports present outreach efforts.

Stream Restoration

For urban streams, "flashier" runoff results in scouring, downcutting and loss of streamside vegetation. Stream channels incised from downcutting become disconnected from their floodplains. Water cannot overflow banks onto the adjacent floodplain where high flows can be dissipated and drop their sediment loads. Silt and sediment from erosion smother the stream bottom and destroy in-stream habitat for sensitive benthic macroinvertebrates. Loss of shade results in increased water temperatures. Fairfax

County has an active (albeit limited) [program of stream restoration](#) to counter these effects.

Stream restoration typically designs the restored stream to handle the new urban flow regime and to reconnect with its floodplain to provide a healthy natural ecosystem. (See Figure 2.) The restored stream also may provide recreational and aesthetic benefits. However, restoration itself is neither a cheap nor a gentle process and often involves heavy construction. DPWES coordinates with landowners and nearby community groups to minimize impacts and achieve project goals.

Figure 2. Colvin Run at Lake Fairfax Park before and after restoration. Source: [DPWES](#).



Colvin Run at Lake Fairfax Park before restoration



Colvin Run at Lake Fairfax Park two years after restoration

DPWES has successfully completed 262 stormwater projects treating about 64,980 acres and restored over 144,300 linear feet (27.3 miles) of degraded streams and outfalls since July 2009. This is about 3 percent of the County's stream-miles. (Complete restoration is neither feasible nor practical for some urban streams.) Typical cost for restoring a stream is \$8M per mile. Despite this cost, stream restoration is almost an order of magnitude more cost-effective than other Best Management Practice for reducing sediment and nutrients. DPWES also has enjoyed success in receiving grants for some restoration work.

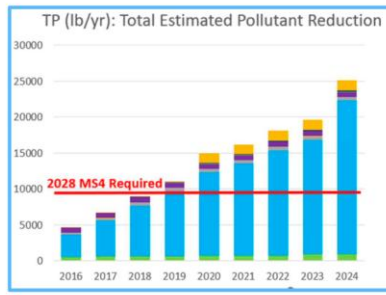
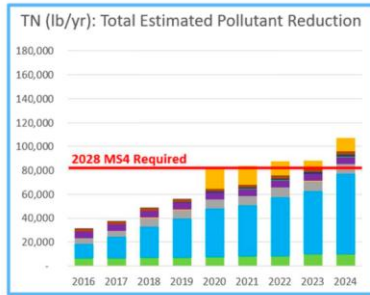
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Stream restoration has been the driving force in successfully meeting the County's TMDL Nitrogen and Phosphorus limits for Chesapeake Bay. Figure 3 shows how critical stream restoration has been as a best management practice.

Figure 3. Bar Charts, 2016-2024, Showing How Critical Stream Restoration Has Been to Reducing Discharges to Chesapeake Bay. (Source: DPWES presentation to EQAC, July 9, 2025.)

Progress Toward Chesapeake Bay TMDL

FY 2010 - FY 2024



STATUS: EQAC commends the DPWES stream restoration program for this remarkable achievement. EQAC supports continuing DPWES' stream restoration efforts at their current level, but with a shift in priorities towards achieving more local TMDL goals and in providing recreational and other benefits to local communities.

Facilities Construction, Inspection, and Maintenance

The county's storm drainage systems, valued at more than \$1 billion, include over 1,400 miles of pipes, 200 miles of constructed open conveyance channels, and almost 68,000 storm structures, some up to 80 years old. Approximately 7,000 county stormwater outfalls are regulated under the MS4 permit. DPWES manages a large number of [Stormwater Improvement Projects](#), with a [summary report available for each Supervisor District](#).

The [Maintenance and Stormwater Management Division \(MSMD\)](#) inspects stormwater facilities to ensure proper maintenance is performed and that the facility is functioning according to the approved design. MSMD provides direct maintenance for approximately one-third of the stormwater facility inventory, which primarily consists of dry ponds serving residential areas. These facilities are referred to as "public facilities." The remaining two-thirds of the stormwater management facility inventory are referred to as "private facilities" and are inspected by MSMD, but maintained by the facility owner or operator.

There are approximately 8,200 public and private stormwater management facilities in Fairfax County's inventory. Much of the inventory consists of ponds, manufactured

(proprietary) devices, infiltration trenches, underground and rooftop detention facilities and sand filters. Other practices like bioretention gardens, swales, tree filters, permeable pavement and green roofs are referred to as green stormwater infrastructure (GSI). GSI requires a greater level of maintenance to ensure functionality. The county inspects county-owned structures biannually and public ones every five years. These inspection rates are consistent with the Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) program requirements.

The MSMD performs preventative maintenance and inspections of 20 state regulated dams that are operated by DPWES. Critical items such as the stability of the dam embankment and the function of the water control structures are addressed on a priority basis. Routine items such as mowing are scheduled up to seven times per year. More information can be found at the [DPWES website](#).

MSMD continued implementation of its storm drainage condition assessment program consistent with the MS4 program requirement to inspect 100 percent of the county's storm drainage system once every five years and at least 15 percent annually. Restoration and rehabilitation of the system is ongoing. Information pertaining to the MS4 Program Plan and annual reports is [online](#).

The inventory of stormwater infrastructure continues to grow by approximately 500 stormwater management facilities and eight miles of pipe per year. Redevelopment and infilling of older properties likely will add to impervious area; at the same time, redevelopment offers the opportunity to rehabilitate or replace older and less effective stormwater management facilities. Facilities built in the 1980's and earlier are reaching the end of their useful lives and may need rehabilitation or replacement. It is clear to EQAC that costs of stormwater management will continue to increase.

The Stormwater Service District tax is a funding mechanism, independent of the general fund, that enables the county to reinvest in its aging infrastructure. It was established by the Board of Supervisors in 2010 to address more stringent regulatory requirements. The current tax is \$0.0325 (three and one quarter cents) per \$100 of assessed real estate value, which generated \$_____ in 2004. This was in addition to any outside grants funding received by DPWES. EQAC recommended in 2024 increasing this tax rate to \$0.0350 per \$100, but the recommendation was not acted upon.

STATUS: The amount the Stormwater Service District tax raises depends on property values which can increase or decrease. In any event, the amount raised must be increased to provide for the necessary stormwater management. Any increase should include funding for the Updated Countywide Flood Reduction Policy, and for new staff positions necessary to increase project delivery capacity.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION 3C-W-2022.1: Increase funding for stormwater management by either an increase in the Stormwater Service District rate in

FY2026 by at least one-quarter of a penny, to \$0.0350 per \$100 of current assessed value, or find an alternative means of providing a similar increase in funds.

Commented [KL7]: We need to discuss this with DPWES. Is current funding adequate? If not, what do we recommend? Is there any formal plan for funding like we have for wastewater?




Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) Stormwater Treatment

Nearly 1,000 acres of impervious road surface area runoff are treated through a system of more than 200 stormwater basins and other measures throughout the county under the [Virginia Department of Transportation's](#) (VDOT's) Virginia Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (VPDES) General Permit (for discharge of stormwater from small [MS4s within the urbanized areas of Virginia](#)). TMDLs have been developed for sediment, nitrogen, and phosphorus by the VDEQ.

Fairfax County continues to explore ways to partner with VDOT on potential stormwater management enhancements that go beyond minimum state regulations and better reflect the county's more stringent stormwater management requirements. Under the County Safety and Operation Improvement Fund (CSOI), VDOT partners with DPWES Stormwater Planning to address maintenance level stormwater drainage projects. Recently, on the VDOT 495 Express Lanes Northern Extension project, VDOT provided funding to support the county's restoration of a segment of Scotts Run stream that will be impacted by the transportation improvements.

DRAFT

Scorecard –Water

Chapter 3A. Water – Drinking Water	Status / EQAC Comments
<p><i>Priority Recommendation 3A-W-2024.3</i> Fairfax County should enact a policy that, if large data centers are approved with evaporative cooling, approval conditions should consider (1) Possible water cutoff during periods of drought; (2) Use of recycled wastewater where feasible; and (3) No return of any “blowdown” to the Occoquan Reservoir.</p>	
<p><i>Chapter 3B. Water – Wastewater</i> <i>Priority Recommendation: 3B-W-2021.1</i> Set the fee rate collected for wastewater treatment to meet the documented (Raftelis Financial Consultants, Inc., December 2024) needs of the necessary upgrades and maintenance requirements for all the plants that serve the county and their respective wastewater collection system, including increases to hire and retain adequate wastewater personnel.</p>	<p>Making progress / Recommended since 2021</p>  <p>This recommendation has been restated in light of the recent financial report.</p>
<p><i>Chapter 3C. Water – Stormwater</i> <i>Recommendation 3C-W-2022.1</i> Increase funding for stormwater management by either an increase in the Stormwater Service District rate in FY2026 by at least one-quarter of a penny, to \$0.0350 per \$100 of current assessed value, or find an alternative means of providing a similar increase in funds.</p>	<p>Stalled this year / Recommended since 2022</p>  <p>This recommendation is restated this year to allow for more flexibility in funding.</p>