

# Health Risks in Water and Sediment at Sparrows Point

A recent study found long-term exposure to sediments and waters adjacent to Coke Point may result in elevated health risks. A meeting to discuss the report will be held June 1 at the North Point Edgemere Volunteer Fire Company.

By [Ron Cassie](#) | [Email the author](#) | May 24, 2011

An environmental study authorized by the state of Maryland released Monday found higher than acceptable levels of risk for human beings and ecological resources with long-term exposure to sediment and surface water along the Coke Point shoreline at Sparrows Point.

The Maryland Port Administration is interested in acquiring the Coke Point peninsula on Sparrows Point as a potential site for a dredged material containment facility for the placement of sediment dredged from the channels in Baltimore Harbor. The MPA commissioned the risk assessment as part of evaluating the Coke Point for a dredging facility.

The Coke Point site is presently owned by RG Steel, the new owners of the steel mill at Sparrows Point. Long-term exposure, according to the study guidelines, is defined as 30 years over a lifespan of 70.

Maryland Director of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation Kim Coble called the findings "disturbing" in a [Baltimore Sun story](#), adding they were in line with contamination found in past sampling. Coble, the *Sun* reported, said authorities should proceed with a study of Bear Creek, a more widely used Patapsco tributary in the Dundalk area near Sparrows Point.

"Bear Creek isn't that far away," Coble told the *Sun*. Last July, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper and a handful of local residents [filed suit against Severstal and ArcelorMittal USA](#), the previous owners of the Sparrows Point mill, accusing them of polluting nearby water and endangering citizens' health.

"The location of a containment facility at Coke Point is one option under consideration as the Port of Baltimore seeks future dredged material placement sites," said Maryland Transportation Secretary Beverley K. Swaim-Staley in a press statement. "However, the benefit of examining the Coke Point location is that data has now been produced that can help guide private and public sector environmental cleanup efforts at the site."

"While we have been hard at work ensuring that the onshore contamination is being addressed, the completion of this study gives us a much better understanding of the scope and nature of the offshore contamination associated with Coke Point," Maryland

Department of the Environment Secretary Robert M. Summers said in a press statement accompanying the report's release. "People who crab or fish in these areas should refer to the existing consumption advisories.

"For nearly a decade, there have been fish consumption advisories in effect for these waters; this study reaffirms that guidance. We understand the communities' concern and agree that this contamination is not acceptable. Additional action by the owners of the property must be taken as soon as possible to address the contamination."

The 2,300-acre Sparrows Point property is subject to a 1997 Judicial Consent Decree, following a suit brought by the Environmental Protection Agency against former mill owners Bethlehem Steel. The decree, still in place with subsequent mill owners, requires a comprehensive site investigation and cleanup to address contamination and is overseen by the Maryland Department of the Environment and the EPA.

The new study also assessed ecological risks for aquatic and benthic (bottom dwelling) organisms such as fish, crabs, worms and clams, and for other wildlife living on and around the Coke Point shoreline. The study found that the potential risk from contamination in offshore sediments and surface water to aquatic, benthic organisms and wildlife is at a level that warrants remedial measures.

"The Sparrows Point property, with its history of more than a century of industrial pollution, is perhaps the most complex cleanup site in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. In recent years, however, significant progress has been made in this difficult endeavor," Summers said in the press release. "Since 2007, MDE and EPA have significantly increased the pressure on the owners of the Sparrows Point property to move from assessing contamination at the site to taking more aggressive cleanup actions and are litigating in court to compel the companies to conduct an assessment of offshore contamination."

Del. John Olszewski Jr., said he was at least pleased that "worst-case scenarios" feared by some about water and sediment near Coke Point were not reflected in the study.

"Still, it's a call to action to seek appropriate remediation as fast as possible," Olszewski said.

Olszewski added that he would like to see the Port Administration ultimately decide to use the Coke Point peninsula as a dredging facility—partly to ensure proper investigation and cleanup of the area.

According to the Port Administration, two of the six proposed treatment cells to recover and treat benzene contamination of groundwater in the Coke Point area are operational, with two additional cells on schedule to be operational by July 2011.

From the report:

“The human health risk assessment for public health impacts showed that:

- Risk from consumption of fish and crabs is comparable to the rest of the Patapsco River, for which MDE has established fish and crab consumption advisories. Advisories can be found at:

<http://www.mde.state.md.us/programs/Marylander/CitizensInfoCenterHome/Pages/citizensinfocenter/fishandshellfish/index.aspx>.

- Potential risk from long-term contact with the surface water in the area along the shoreline of Coke Point is higher than in the background area of the Patapsco River and higher than levels typically considered acceptable.

- Potential risks from long-term contact with the sediment is elevated at levels higher than in the background areas of the Patapsco River but within levels typically considered acceptable.

The ecological risk assessment showed that:

- Ecological risks are higher for Coke Point than for the background area in the Patapsco River.

- Concentrations of contaminants in the Coke Point offshore sediments exceeded levels considered to be fully protective of aquatic animals.

- Risks to aquatic animals from off shore surface water exceeded levels considered to be protective.

- For wildlife, the assessment indicated potential risks to wildlife which eat aquatic animals that are exposed to contaminants in the sediment.”

The report can be found [here](#).

*A public meeting on the risk assessment will be held June 1 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the North Point Edgemere Volunteer Fire Department, 7500 North Point Rd., Baltimore, MD 21219.*