

Panel of experts concludes bay's health is 'past crisis'

BY JASON BABCOCK

STAFF WRITER

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An ecologist, a waterman and a state bureaucrat weighed in Thursday evening on the health of the Chesapeake Bay. Their rankings of the bay's condition started low and dropped even lower as the discussion progressed.

The forum hosted at St. Mary's College posed the question whether the bay's health is at a crisis or a crossroads.

On a scale from 1 to 10, the average given by the three men was on the low end of the scale.

"I think we're past crisis," said Robert Paul, biology professor at the college. He cited sewer problems and nutrients running off the land into the waters, which fertilize algae. Unnatural algae blooms block light from submerged vegetation and rob the water of oxygen.

"The wet years are worse than the dry years," he said, because more nutrients are washed into the bay and its tributaries.

In the early 1600s when colonists set up in Jamestown, Va., they were able to live off Atlantic sturgeon during the winters. Those fish can hardly be found now. Oyster beds were so massive and plentiful then that they would poke up above the surface of the water during low tide. Now some are calling to label the native oyster an endangered species.

"By 1830, huge boxcars full of oysters out of Baltimore went

westward toward Ohio," Paul said. In 1887, 20 million bushels of oysters were taken out of the bay. Now watermen are lucky if they collectively harvest 100,000 bushels a year.

"It's a sad story. It's a story of exploitation," he said.

Paul ranked the health of the bay at a 4.

Jack Russell, a St. George Island waterman and now a county commissioner candidate, gave the bay's health a 2. "We're way down there, buddy," he said to a person in the audience who posed the question.

"Gee, I thought I was a pessimist," Paul said.

Back when watermen could make a good living, Russell said, "It was a good life; it was a good independent life."

But during the 1980s, disease began to ravage the oyster population. Russell saw his own harvest go down from 50 bushels an hour to 10. "I was right there when the big oyster demise started," he said. "By 1989, I had to get out of the racket."

C. Ronald Franks, the secretary of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, ranked the bay's health at a 4. Appointed to his post by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich (R), Franks said,

"This governor gave me a charge" to base all decisions on science. "It has not been a political issue. I'm very proud of him for that," he said.

The governor began the Bay Restoration Fund, which charges citizens on public

water and sewer serves a monthly fee. Those on septic systems are charged \$30 a year. Funds then go to upgrade the state's 66 wastewater treatment plants to reduce levels of nitrogen going into the Chesapeake.

The state also aims to plant 1,000 acres of bay grasses by 2010, Franks said.

The Chesapeake's watershed includes New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia and Virginia. Someone in the audience wanted to know how the states were working in concert to aid the bay.

"We all try to work together to reduce nutrients, but the reality is it's all voluntary," Franks said.

From the audience, Sue Veith, environmental planner with the St. Mary's County Department of Land Use and Growth Management, said of current regulations, "We don't do what we have on the books now."

Franks said his department doesn't have enforcement powers for environmental issues — that belongs to the Maryland Department of the Environment. Paul said MDE inspectors are stretched too thin now.

Willpower is needed at all levels of government to help restore the bay, Russell said. "My generation has literally failed this Chesapeake," he said.

"I changed my mind. I think it's a 1 the more I talk," Paul said of the bay's health.

E-mail Jason Babcock at jbabcock@somdnews.com.