



## RIVERKEEPER WATCHDOG PROGRAM REPORTING GUIDE September 2021

Watchdog reports from community members is an integral part of Riverkeeper's Watchdog program over the last several decades. Ranging from Superfund sites, to suspected oil spills, to dead sturgeon, Watchdog reports made by the general public are reviewed by Riverkeeper staff, and investigated further when necessary. This guide contains best reporting practices, signs of normal activity, and other resources.

*Please note: All information will be treated as confidential unless otherwise agreed upon.*

### REPORTING BEST PRACTICES

1. **Watchdog reports should be submitted in a timely manner.** Watchdog reports should be made as soon as possible after an observation of concern is made. Conditions on the river can change quickly and faster reporting increases the likelihood the reported concern will be observable/documentable by Riverkeeper or other agencies who visit the site for additional investigation.
2. **Reports should provide a precise location and photo/video documentation.** Watchdog reports should provide as much detail about the location as possible, such as an address, GPS coordinates, or directions to the location, as well as photos of the observation of concern.
3. **Description of the observation of concern should be detailed.** Descriptions of the potential threat/observation of concern should include odors, visual characteristics, any identifiable source, waterbody, nearby landmarks, and weather conditions (particularly precipitation). Consider questions such as who, what, when, where, and provide observations rather than conclusions where possible

Submit a [Watchdog Report via Google Forms](#) or call 914-478-4501 ext 231. *If you are reporting an active petroleum or chemical spill or other emergency situation please contact the NYSDEC Spills Hotline at 1-800-457-7362 and/or your local police and emergency responders.*

## SIGNS OF A POLLUTION VIOLATION

- **Water Discoloration:** Water discoloration is often a sign of pollution. Discoloration can take the form of brown, muddy or cloudy water. Oil sheens, water with an unusual color, and floating films or scum can also be a sign of pollution. When observing water discoloration, always make a note of whether the discolored water is coming from a pipe, ditch, or other source and whether the discoloration affects the entire waterway or is confined to an area or plume. If the source is coming from a container, vessel, or vehicle, a photograph of the source and any labeling is ideal. If you don't have a camera or smartphone, note the characteristics and condition of the container (e.g., metal/plastic, size, shape, color, quantity; bulging, rusted, covered) and describe the indicators of leakage. If coming from a pipe look for a green SPDES permit sign and write down the number if possible.
- **Dumping:** Illegal dumping can take many forms: Federal and state law prohibit dumping or filling of water bodies and wetlands without a permit. Look for garbage, debris, dirt, or fill materials such as rock or concrete dumped or pushed into water bodies or wetlands. Federal and State laws also prohibit “open dumping” where garbage or other solid waste is dumped instead of being properly disposed of in a landfill. Look for garbage, debris, tires, scrap, and other waste dumped on banks or shores.
- **Unusual Odors:** Strong or unusual odors can be a sign of pollution. The smell of sewage can indicate an overflowing manhole, sewer pipe, septic system failure, or discharge from a combined sewer overflow (CSO). Sewage overflows often occur after heavy rain. Chemical, petroleum, or other acrid smells can indicate an oil or chemical spill or the presence of fumes from contaminated land or groundwater.

Submit a [Watchdog Report via Google Forms](#) or call 914-478-4501 ext 231. *If you are reporting an active petroleum or chemical spill or other emergency situation please contact the NYSDEC Spill Hotline at 800-457-7362 and/or your local police and emergency responders.*

## DECEASED STURGEON / DEAD FISH

- **Reporting deceased sturgeon.** Atlantic and shortnose sturgeon are protected by the Endangered Species Act. If you find a dead sturgeon, do not touch or move it. Take photographs and careful notes, and please report it to these three entities ASAP:
  - NYSDEC’s Hudson River Fisheries Unit: E-mail [HUDSONRIVERFISH@DEC.NY.GOV](mailto:HUDSONRIVERFISH@DEC.NY.GOV) and then call DEC fisheries staff at 845-256-3071.
  - Riverkeeper: [WATCHDOG@RIVERKEEPER.ORG](mailto:WATCHDOG@RIVERKEEPER.ORG) and 914-478-4501 ext 231.
  - REPORTING CRITERIA:
    - Specific location where fish was found.
    - Condition of the fish. Note if it is badly decayed or freshly killed.
    - Signs of trauma, and where the signs of trauma appear on the fish.

- Length of fish, from nose to tip of upper tail fin (estimate length if you can't measure).
  - Look for external tags affixed for scientific research, usually a yellow streamer at or near the base of the dorsal fin. Take note of any writing on the tags.
  - Check the left pelvic fin. If it is clipped, it may have been marked by scientists for research.
  - Take a picture of the entire fish.
  - Take pictures of any injuries.
  - Take a picture of the head and mouth, from below. (This will allow for proper identification of the species.)
  - Leave the fish where it was found. Possession of endangered species is not allowed.
- **Reporting groups of dead fish / suspected fish kills.** In late fall/early winter of 2020, Riverkeeper received over 100 reports of deceased mehanden across New York Harbor, the Hudson River, and in the nearby Long Island Sound. [Read the NJDEP's FAQ on the 2020 die off.](#)
  - **REPORTING CRITERIA:**
    - Specific location where fish was found.
    - Condition of the fish. Note if it is badly decayed or freshly killed.
    - Signs of trauma, and where the signs of trauma appear on the fish.
    - Length of fish, from nose to tip of upper tail fin (estimate length if you can't measure).
    - Take a pictures of the fish, including of any visible injuries

Submit a [Watchdog Report via Google Forms](#) or call 914-478-4501 ext 231. ***If you are reporting an active petroleum or chemical spill or other emergency situation please contact the NYSDEC Spill Hotline at 800-457-7362 and/or your local police and emergency responders.***

## **SIGNS OF NORMAL ACTIVITY:**

**Foam:** We frequently receive reports of foam or other white streaks in the Hudson River. This foam is generally caused by the mixing of salt and freshwater in the river and is seen in different geographic areas stretching from NYC to the mid-Hudson depending on the tide and recent levels of rain. These foam streaks are generally not a cause for concern.



### **Ships and Barges Carrying Petroleum:**

Legal anchorages exist along the west side of Manhattan, and off of both Yonkers and Hyde Park. Vessels anchor at these locations frequently. At other locations, commercial vessels are only allowed to anchor if they are encountering a navigation risk or mechanical emergency. Periodically, the

Captain of the Port of New York will order tugs and barges out of the Port of New York during extreme weather (such as Hurricane Sandy) for the safety of the vessels, cargo, and crew. **If you see commercial vessels anchored outside these three designated areas, submit a [report](#) immediately to Riverkeeper with a photo, date, and time of observation so we can report them to the USCG.**

**Freshwater intrusion in Poughkeepsie/Highland area:** The Hudson River is a tidal estuary, meaning saltwater from the Atlantic Ocean pushes up from New York Harbor, and freshwater runs down into the river from tributaries and runoff. The meeting of the freshwater and saltwater creates mixing conditions that may appear concerning to those unfamiliar with the dynamics of the estuary.

**Pollen:** During the spring, summer, and fall when pollen production is heightened pollen can land on the surface of the river, streams, and ponds, creating matte swirls as the pollen lands and the water circulates. This is not a concerning occurrence, but a seasonal phenomenon taking place in the spring, summer, and fall seasons. [Learn more about pollen on the Hudson.](#)



**Combined Sewer Overflows:** Combined sewer overflows (CSOs) are sewer systems where a community's stormwater shares the same pipes as the wastewater from tubs, sinks, and toilets. All of the sewage and stormwater is delivered to the local wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) for treatment. All WWTPs have a limit to the amount of flow they can properly treat, and an uncontrolled backup of combined stormwater and sewage could lead to untreated wastewater flowing into the basements (or ground floors) of nearby homes, schools, and offices, and/or nearby manholes. To prevent that, combined sewers have CSOs that are designed to discharge the excess

untreated stormwater and sewage into local waterways, such as the Hudson River or its tributaries.

CSOs are to be expected during and immediately after precipitation events, but you should not see flow from those outfalls during dry weather. Modern sewer systems separate the sanitary sewers from the storm sewers, which (when properly maintained) prevents the discharge of untreated sewage into our waterways.

**CSOs are normal during precipitation events, but outfalls should not be running during dry weather.**

- [Learn more about CSOs](#) on the Riverkeeper website
- [This is what a Hudson River sewage overflow looks like.](#)
  - [Watch the City of Poughkeepsie's video on CSOs in the Hudson River](#)
- [New York State DEC](#) - Discharge reports, Sewage Right to Know, etc.

## **LEGACY POLLUTION**

- **Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs):** For several decades, PCBs were discharged into the Hudson River by General Electric from their facilities in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward in upstate New York. PCBs have well-documented harmful health effects, and consumption of PCBs through contaminated food (such as Hudson River fish) can cause liver, kidney and nervous system disorders, as well as developmental and reproductive abnormalities. The New York State Department of Health (DOH) advises no individual eat any fish caught between Hudson Falls and the Federal Dam in Troy, and women of childbearing age and children under 15 to not eat fish from the Hudson River south of Hudson Falls. .
  - Learn more about PCBs and the Superfund cleanup
    - [Riverkeeper's PCB webpage](#)
    - [US EPA's PCB Superfund cleanup](#)
- **Sheen under the Walkway Over the Hudson:** The oily sheen under the Walkway Over the Hudson along the Hudson River's eastern shoreline. The source of the pollution from a manufactured gas plant at the end of Dutches Avenue in Poughkeepsie. This is legacy pollution that originally leaked into the ground from storage vessels and piping at the former plant, carried by groundwater and now bubbling up through the sediment at the bottom of the river. The site is owned by Central Hudson Gas & Electric Corp. Central Hudson is in the midst of a multi-year remediation project at the site.
  - More on the [cleanup's website](#) or call 845-867-4064.
  - Learn more about why cleanup is important in this [2015 blog post](#), and a [history of 100-years of coal tar pollution in the Hudson River](#).

## **INVASIVE SPECIES**

- Invasive species are species from other parts of the world that have been accidentally introduced into New York State and have flourished, often challenging the ability of native species to compete. Common invasive species in the Hudson River are [water chestnuts, didymo, hydrilla, zebra mussels, and grass carp](#).
  - [View DEC's guidance on preventing the spread of aquatic invasive species.](#)
  - [Resources for boat owners](#)

## ALGAE BLOOMS

- It can be challenging to identify a Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB). If you suspect a HAB, avoid swimming, boating, recreating in or drinking water with a bloom. Excessive nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen in combination with environmental conditions are likely the cause of most harmful algal blooms. HABs may cause the water to look green, like pea soup, and they may also look like foam or spilled paint floating on the surface of the water. If you suspect a HAB in the Hudson River watershed, take photos and report it to DEC using the [Suspicious Algal Bloom Report Form](#) or e-mail [HABsInfo@dec.ny.gov](mailto:HABsInfo@dec.ny.gov).
  - [Additional information on HABs from DEC.](#)



Submit a [Watchdog Report via Google Forms](#) or call 914-478-4501 ext 231. ***If you are reporting an active petroleum or chemical spill or other emergency situation please contact the NYSDEC Spill Hotline at 800-457-7362 and/or your local police and emergency responders.***