

Something rotten in Dunkard

By Cindy Bailey GreeneSpeak Editor/Publisher

Following the massive fish kill in Dunkard Creek which began Sept. 1 in Pentress, W. Va., environmental regulators have found themselves with a smelly, slimy mess on their hands.

Officials are estimating that 10,000 aquatic animals, including 161 species, have died in the formerly popular fishing site, a creek that snakes around the Mason-Dixon Line, through Mt. Morris and Bobtown, before finally dumping into the Mon River.

Despite today's speedy technology, answers are coming in slow as to what exactly caused this 38-mile environmental disaster, but the amount of activity in and around the creek makes you wonder why it didn't happen before.

THEY'RE DUMPING IN OUR AQUIFER

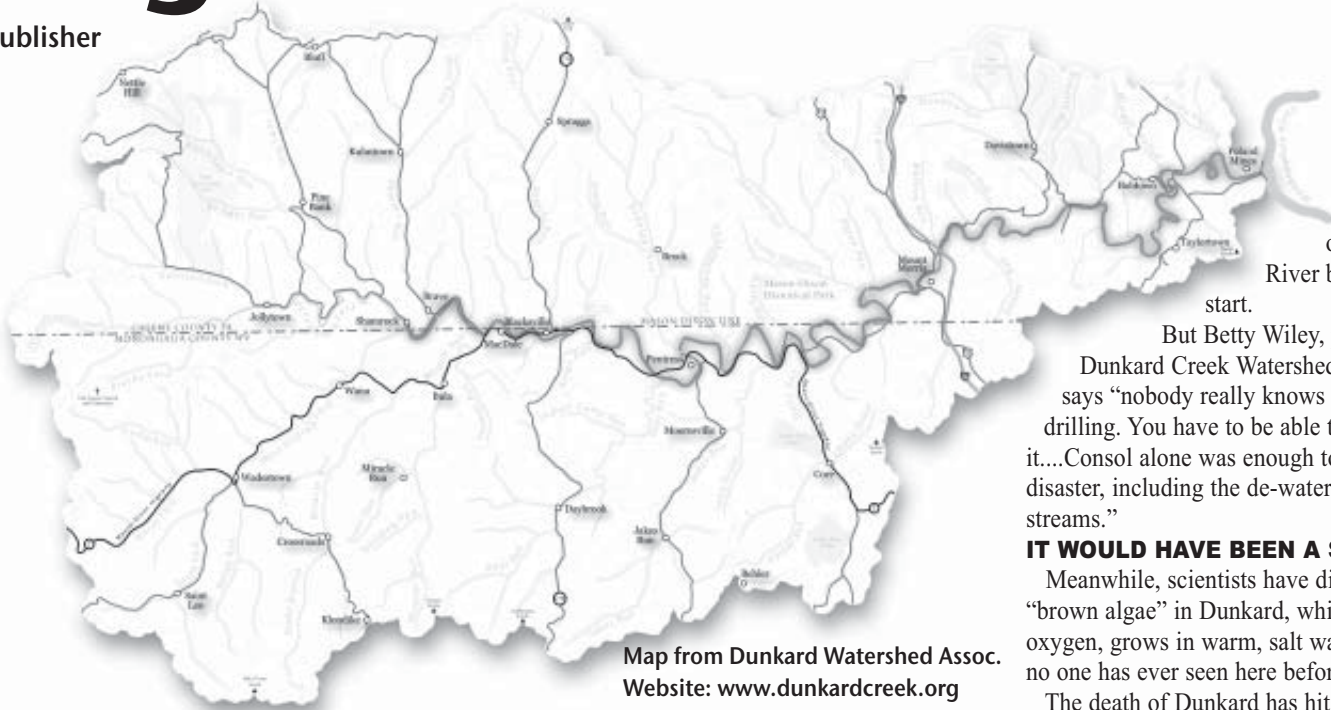
Through the past several years, Dunkard has experienced problems from acid mine drainage, but Martin Niverth, Conservation District Manager, says the county and state have been working to change that.

"It has been improving," he said, by installing new sewage lines and plants, implementing new agricultural systems, and the opening of the GenPower facility to treat the former Shannopin Mine drainage. But he said, "they're dumping into an aquifer we're trying to fix."

Just who "they" are and what they're dumping includes:

- Consol Energy which discharges water from mine-water treatment facilities at Blacksville No. 2 and Loveridge Mines in West Virginia. This water is high in chloride and "solids." For whatever reason, the West Virginia DEP has been bending the rules here since 2004, allowing unlimited amounts of chloride into the creek until 2013. (Apparently the EPA was not aware of this. They say states have some latitude regarding the Clean Water Act).

- CNX Gas (a subsidiary of Consol) also dumps brine from coal bed methane operations into the Morris Run Borehole in Greene County, part of the former Blacksville No. 1 Mine. In August, this facility was cited and CNX was to be fined \$157,500 "for alleged failure to provide adequate operator staffing at its Morris Run injection well facility; failure to submit information to EPA as required by the permit;



Map from Dunkard Watershed Assoc.
Website: www.dunkardcreek.org

alleged failure to monitor cumulative volume; and alleged failure to report to EPA its noncompliance with its permit." Since the fish kill, the EPA has ordered CNX to stop all dumping at this site to help pinpoint the cause.

But Niverth says most of this activity has been going on for decades, adding, "Through all that, you could always catch fish in Dunkard Creek."

GAS DRILLING OPERATIONS BALLOON

What's changed, of course, is the onslaught of gas drilling activity which has ballooned since the discovery of technology that can drill horizontally. The "fracking" process forces water through the shale to break it up, requiring at least a million gallons of chemical-laced water to be trucked in and back out per well.

"This region was not prepared for the industry to come in here as hard as it did, with people getting permits to operate gas well drilling," Niverth said. "We have no capacity to handle or treat the water."

The lack of capacity is twofold. In some cases, truckers are sucking streams dry, then later dumping the briny wastewater into creeks like Dunkard. At this point, no one has been charged or accused publicly, but residents near

adding that forming a strong watershed association of the Mon River basin would be a start.

But Betty Wiley, president of the Dunkard Creek Watershed Association, says "nobody really knows about the drilling. You have to be able to prove it....Consol alone was enough to cause this disaster, including the de-watering of the streams."

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A SANCTUARY

Meanwhile, scientists have discovered "brown algae" in Dunkard, which robs fish of oxygen, grows in warm, salt water, and which no one has ever seen here before.

The death of Dunkard has hit the nearby communities hard, especially the Mt. Morris Sportsman Muskie Club. Back on Sept. 12 when the pollution or brown algae or whatever was floating through Perry Township, these guys were frantically trying to rescue muskies and catfish measuring as long as four feet by tossing them into the clear, fresh water of Big Shannon Run.

The group was distraught that no environmental official upstream had let them know what was coming.

Watching several large catfish and muskies swirl around his feet in the shallow waters of Shannon Run, one man said, "It would have taken us half an hour to dig this out across the mouth of Shannon....It would have been a sanctuary for them."

Still, Betty says, it's not just about the lives of fish. "Dunkard is like the canary in the coal mine; the death of its creatures is a warning about our own future health."

Officials from the Monongalia Recreation and Commerce Committee, Pa. DEP, W. Va. DEP, EPA, Consol, and others will report on their latest findings regarding Dunkard Creek at 9:30 a.m. Oct. 9 at Morgantown Airport. The public is invited to attend.

