



Potomac River Basin Facts

Drainage Area:

- ◆ Total: 14,670 square miles (37,995.15 square kilometers)
- ◆ In Pennsylvania: 1,584 square miles (4,103 square kilometers)

Length of River:

- ◆ Potomac River: 383 miles (616.38 kilometers)

Watershed Address from Headwaters to Mouth:

- ◆ The Potomac flows from Fairfax Stone, West Virginia, to Point Lookout, Maryland, and into the Atlantic Ocean. The course of the Potomac does not pass through Pennsylvania, but there are many tributaries flowing south out of the state that are part of the Potomac River basin.

Major Tributaries in Pennsylvania:

- ◆ Antietam and Conococheague Creeks

Major Tributaries Outside of Pennsylvania:

- ◆ Shenandoah, South Branch, Monocacy, Savage, Cacapon, Anacostia, and Occoquan Rivers

Population:

- ◆ Total: 4.6 million people; 3.7 million live in the Washington metropolitan area
- ◆ In Pennsylvania: 140,000 people

Major Cities in Pennsylvania:

- ◆ Gettysburg and Chambersburg

Who Is Responsible for the Overall Management of the Water Basin?

- ◆ The Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin

Economic Importance and Uses:

- ◆ Improved water quality and the continued rural character of the river have helped spur the recreation industry. The C&O Canal is now a national bike path from Washington D.C. to Cumberland, Maryland, and connects with the Great Allegheny Passage soon reaching all the way to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Rails-to-trails, greenways, parks, historic sites, and viewsheds are all being combined and marketed to show potential visitors the wealth of recreational opportunities that exist along the length of the Potomac.
- ◆ The basin supports commercial fishing, as well as crabbing and oyster harvesting.



Industrial Uses:

- ◆ The Potomac is navigable only as far as Washington, D.C., or Fall Line, the boundary between the Atlantic Coastal Plain and the upland Piedmont Province. To provide transport of raw materials and finished products to market, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was constructed along the banks of the Potomac River. The C&O Canal's terminus was Cumberland, Maryland, and its major cargo was coal from the headwaters of the Potomac. The canal was replaced by the railroad, which continues to snake along the banks of the Potomac.
- ◆ The environmental problems from the past coal industry, both deep mining and strip mining, continue to influence the water quality of the Potomac. Rich deposits of limestone are still quarried within the watershed and once supplied a vast cement industry along the river.
- ◆ Tire and rayon industries once heavily affected the water quality of the Potomac, but now are almost nonexistent within the watershed. Chemical manufacturing is still a major industry in the Shenandoah Valley.

Public Water Supply:

- ◆ Approximately 460 million gallons of water per day is withdrawn from the river for use by people in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. In rural areas, about 100 million gallons of ground water is consumed per day.

Agricultural Uses:

- ◆ Much of the Potomac watershed is still rural and agricultural practices are a major influence on the river.
- ◆ A growing problem is the introduction of industrial farming. The practice of raising thousands of chickens or pigs in a very small area puts a great demand on the available ground water supply. In such an operation, the potential failure of the manure treatment system can have devastating effects on the river.

Historical Uses:

- ◆ Commercial fishing was once a major economic influence when Atlantic sturgeon was the "King of Fishes" and caviar factories dotted the lower Potomac. Pollution has pushed the sturgeon from its breeding ground, forcing the last commercial sturgeon fishing operation to close in the 1920's. With the continued improvement of water quality, perhaps the sturgeon will return.

Recreational Uses:

- ◆ Many recreational opportunities are available along the Potomac, and more are in the planning stages. The Potomac has a long cultural history, living resources, extensive woodlands, and scenic beauty. Boating, swimming, hiking, camping, fishing, and hunting are all possible throughout the



watershed. Many tourism-related attractions are also available along the Potomac.

Pennsylvania State Parks in the Potomac River Basin:

- ◆ Three state parks are located in the basin:
Buchanan's Birthplace, Caledonia, Mont Alto

Geological Information:

- ◆ The Potomac River cuts across five physiographic provinces on its journey to the Chesapeake Bay. From its headwater tributaries in the Appalachian Plateau, the river flows eastward through the Ridge and Valley Province, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Piedmont, and Atlantic Coastal Plain.

Unique Features:

- ◆ Falling Springs Greenway is one of the oldest monitoring groups in Pennsylvania, and Falling Springs Creek is one of only three (3) designated limestone wild fisheries in the state. These streams are rare nationwide.
- ◆ Mount Vernon, the nation's first historic preserve; Gettysburg, the first National Battlefield Park; and Rock Creek Park, the first natural area designated a park, are all located in the basin.