

AG files suit against Verso over discharges into river

Complaint says Verso’s efforts have not prevented new pollution

Complaint says owners of Luke paper mill unlawfully releasing pollutants into North Branch of Potomac

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CUMBERLAND — Maryland Attorney General Brian Frosh filed a lawsuit Monday against the Verso Corp., owners of the Luke paper mill, for unlawful pollution discharges into the North Branch of the Potomac River.

In a press release, Frosh said Verso has been allowing, “a black liquid appearing to be pulping liquor, a corrosive and caustic substance created, and also sometimes reused, during the paper-making process.”

Verso owns the Luke paper mill, located in Luke, and Beryl, West Virginia, with facilities spanning the Potomac River at the site. Paper products were manufactured at the mill until Verso announced on April 30 the mill would be closed. The mill was subsequently shut down on May 30, displacing nearly 700 workers.

“Verso has repeatedly discharged highly caustic, dangerous pollutants into Maryland’s waters,” Frosh said. “After numerous attempts to get Verso to comply with Maryland environmental law, the company continues to allow pulping liquor to contaminate the river, harming fish and wildlife, in violation of Maryland’s laws.” Following reports of the leaks, an inspection of the site indicated the black liquid was seeping into the river from the southern riverbank. Samples were taken and the Maryland Department of the Environment directed Verso to determine the source and take steps to mitigate the discharge and follow up with a report.

A Washington Post story in October said the Maryland Department of the Environment had been working with Verso since April to pinpoint the source of the leak and develop a plan to clean it up. However, followup inspections again revealed the black discharge into the river.

The suit seeks an order requiring Verso to stop discharging pollutants into Maryland waters, post signs warning of the risks of exposure to the discharge, remediate any harm caused by the unlawful discharges, and pay appropriate civil penalties for past and ongoing violations of Maryland’s environmental laws. Frosh’s press release said Verso had installed sump pumps and collected some of the black liquid from the riverbank.

“Verso has taken some steps to investigate and collect seepage before it enters

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BRIAN FROSH

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was “working closely” with regulators from Maryland and West Virginia on the situation.

the river, however, these efforts have not prevented pollution from entering the river daily from at least April 6 to present,” the release said.

Jay Apperson, MDE deputy director of communications, told the Cumberland Times-News on Oct. 30 the leak was on the West Virginia side of the river near the location of a tank that was used to store black liquor before it was taken out of service and demolished in 2008.

Tests revealed the samples showed high pH and low dissolved oxygen concentrations as well as high sulphur and sodium content.

Kathi Rowzie, media spokesperson for Verso, told the Times-News in late October the company

“Verso has not yet received the complaint, but we continue to work cooperatively and transparently with both Maryland and West Virginia regulatory agencies to address concerns at the facility,” Rowzie said in an emailed statement Monday. “This includes conducting a subsurface hydrogeological study at the direction of the Maryland Department of the Environment, and emptying all of the liquor tanks and process vessels in the vicinity of the river seeps.”

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