

Think twice before swimming in Shenandoah waterways — they're full of fecal bacteria



Streamside livestock fencing in the Shenandoah Valley reduces runoff pollution and bacteria in Shenandoah waterways.
Alan Lehman/Shenandoah Riverkeeper

Monique Calello

Staunton News Leader

<https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/2022/08/04/va-department-environmental-quality-e-coli-waterways-high-rates/65390958007/>

Washington, D.C. — Do you want to know what's in a large majority of the waterways in the Shenandoah Valley? Poop — and a lot of it apparently.

About three quarters of Virginia's water monitoring stations in the Shenandoah Valley found levels of fecal bacteria so high in the first half of 2022 that they exceeded EPA recommendations for warning people about the health risks of swimming or splashing in the water.

Seventy-six percent of Virginia Department of Environmental Quality sampling locations (44 of 58) in Shenandoah waterways from Jan. 1 through July 12 of this year (the most recent available data) had levels of E. coli that

were unsafe for swimming or recreation, according to an analysis of state monitoring numbers by the nonprofit Environmental Integrity Project. In 2021, 60% (29 of 48) of the water monitoring stations in the Valley did not meet the standard.

Both the first half of 2022, and all of 2021, had lower bacteria numbers than the average for 2015 to 2020, when almost 80% of samples had unhealthy levels of bacteria. Lower rainfall levels in 2021 may have temporarily reduced the runoff of manure and other pollutants that drive up bacteria levels in rivers and streams.

“The bacteria levels in the Shenandoah River are still too high, and Virginia needs to do more to encourage — or require — streamside livestock fencing and prevent the chronic over application of manure to farm fields,” said Eric Schaeffer, executive director of the Environmental Integrity Project. “The Shenandoah Valley is a treasure that deserves better protections. We do recognize that Virginia is taking steps to increase funding for farm best management practices, including by adding streamside fencing, and that deserves praise.”

In March, the Virginia General Assembly approved a record \$265 million for fiscal years 2023 and 2024 for farm pollution-control best management practices — including streamside livestock fencing and other steps to reduce runoff into waterways.

Despite the persistently high bacteria levels in the Shenandoah, Virginia has posted no signs warning rafters, kayakers or swimmers about bacteria levels — as it does regularly with swimming advisories on ocean beaches with high bacteria levels, the Environmental Integrity Project reported. The EPA recommends warning swimmers when concentrations of *E. coli* bacteria exceed 235 colony forming units per 100 milliliters of water.

Year	Number of Sites Sampled	Sites Where Bacteria Exceeded EPA's Swimming Advisory Value	Percent of Sites Over EPA Swimming Advisory Value	Annual Rainfall (inches)
2015	70	65	93%	43.7
2016	74	56	76%	39.4
2017	66	48	73%	38.9
2018	69	56	81%	63.3
2019	35	26	74%	38.1
2020	25	18	72%	46.9
2021	48	29	60%	36.8
2022*	58	38	65%	21.3

Fecal bacteria levels in Shenandoah Waterways, 2015-2022. * Numbers for 2022 are for Jan.1 through July 12. Water sampling data from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality. The threshold value used in this chart is EPA's "beach action value" for swimming, which recommends states warn the public when bacteria levels exceed 235 counts of E. coli bacteria/100 ml water. Annual rainfall data from NOAA for Harrisonburg, Va. *Virginia Department Of Environmental Quality*

Saltwater vs. freshwater bacteria levels and public safety warnings

The Virginia Department of Health does conduct bacteria monitoring in **saltwater** beach swimming areas of Virginia, and it issues swimming warnings for bacteria in those areas (like in Virginia Beach, for example.)

"But because of budget limitations, VDH does not have the staff or resources to also monitor swimming and rafting areas in **freshwater** areas of the state, like the Shenandoah River and its tributaries," said Tom Pelton, director of communications at the Environmental Integrity Project.

In 2018, VDH applied for \$200,000 in funding to be able to monitor the freshwater swimming areas of the state, but the General Assembly turned them down, according to the EIP.

Instead, in these freshwater areas, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality does the water quality monitoring in the freshwater parts of the state, but VDEQ does not issue bacteria warnings for swimmers, explained Pelton.

The Environmental Integrity Project uses EPA's recommended level of E coli bacteria that should trigger a health threat warning to people swimming or tubing or rafting in the waterways, even though Virginia does not issue these warnings in freshwater parts of the state.

"We have complained in past reports that it's unfair to middle class and working-class people in the Shenandoah Valley that they don't have the same level of health protections as perhaps the tourists who have condos on saltwater beaches like Virginia Beach," said Pelton.

Last year, the Environmental Integrity Project released — and submitted to the state — a report on just this subject: the lack of adequate monitoring and warnings for freshwater parts of the state, including the Shenandoah Valley.

Livestock manure and runoff into Valley streams

Almost 160 million chickens, 16 million turkeys and 528,000 cows are raised annually in the Shenandoah Valley's Augusta, Page, Shenandoah and Rockingham counties. Most of their manure is spread on surrounding farmland as fertilizer, but it contains far more phosphorus than crops need for growth, the EIP said. The excess manure leaks pollutants into groundwater and is often washed by rain into surrounding streams.

Bacteria levels in waterways are known to increase after periods of heavy rainfall because rain flushes fertilizer and sediment into rivers and streams. Total rainfall in Harrisonburg, in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, was significantly lower in 2021 (about 37 inches) than the annual average from 2015 to 2020 (46 inches). That lower rainfall in 2021 could have temporarily reduced bacteria levels that year, said the EIP. Complete numbers are not yet available for 2022.

In April 2019, the Environmental Integrity Project and the Shenandoah Riverkeeper released the study, [Livestock Fencing in the Shenandoah Valley](#), that used aerial photographs of the livestock industry in to show that 81% of farms in the state's two largest farming counties — Augusta and Rockingham — failed to fence their cattle out of streams, contributing to bacteria contamination.

This low fencing rate was despite a pledge by the state of Virginia to EPA that 95% of streams through pastures would have livestock fencing by 2025 to meet the goals of the state's cleanup plan for Chesapeake Bay.

The release of that April 2019 report spurred the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation to perform its own aerial survey of livestock fencing. Virginia lawmakers then approved increased funding and reimbursement rates to encourage more farmers to install streamside livestock fencing. Legislators also passed a law that allows state officials to mandate streamside livestock fencing if the agricultural sector fails to achieve Bay pollution reduction goals by 2025.

As a result of the increased funding, an increased number of farmers in Virginia started enrolling in a state program to install livestock fencing. In Augusta and Rockingham counties, the number of farmers signing up for the streamside fencing program grew from 26 in fiscal year 2019, to 38 in fiscal year 2020, to 55 in fiscal year 2021, and 40 in fiscal year 2022, according to data from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation.

For more details about bacteria monitoring in the Shenandoah Valley, [click here](#).

In October 2019, Virginia revoked its “beach action value” for E. coli in freshwater areas, which is a trigger value for potential health risks for people swimming or recreating in waters with more than 235 counts of E. coli/100 ml of water. The Commonwealth no longer has a beach warning value for freshwater areas like the Shenandoah River and issues no warnings when fecal bacteria levels are high in these areas.

However, despite Virginia’s change, EPA continues to recommend that states warn swimmers of potential health risks when E coli counts exceed 235 counts of E. coli/100 ml of water. So, the Environmental Integrity Project in its [annual reporting on the issue](#) uses this level of bacteria as a yardstick of potential threat for water contact recreation.

Environmental Integrity Project helps to reduce carbon pollution and toxics in Shenandoah waterways.

To examine an online map with details about Virginia’s bacteria monitoring results in locations up and down the Shenandoah Valley, and where it is safe to swim, [click here](#).

The Environmental Integrity Project is a 20-year-old nonprofit organization, based in Washington D.C. and Austin, Texas, dedicated to the enforcement of environmental laws and the strengthening of policy to protect public health and the environment.

Virginia has just 132 adult ICU beds left in the entire state. When's the cavalry coming?

Monique Calello

Staunton News Leader

<https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/2022/01/13/icu-bed-shortage-virginia-drops-hospital-capacity-sharp-lows/6512355001/>

I checked the Virginia Hospital COVID-19 dashboard Wednesday morning to find out how many ICU beds are still available in the commonwealth.

Only 135 ICU beds were remaining for adults. Add in about 230 pediatric ICU beds that are still available that could be used for adults if kids didn't need them.

Julian Walker, Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association's VP of Communications, said the state is at 90% capacity of ICU beds as of Jan. 13.

Two days before, Gov. Ralph Northam declared a state of emergency for Virginia hospitals, effectively decreasing red tape and giving medical professionals, like physician assistants, the ability to help patients without a doctor standing over their shoulders. It's more of a re-instatement of last year's expired executive order with a spotlight on hospitals this time around.

According to the Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association, the governor's executive order will allow hospitals to get surge beds licensed faster.

Most hospitals already have their surge plans in place so I'm not entirely sure how this makes much of a "right now" difference? Plus, each hospital has its own surge plan, so it's nearly impossible to know what the total number of beds are available if we take into account surge beds.

The governor's executive order will help streamline the process for hospitals to get a licensed bed, but there are licensed beds and then there are licensed-and-staffed beds.

Given Virginia's significant challenge in staffing its hospitals, according to Walker, while having the bed flexibility is welcome, the other layer to this is having the staff to attend to those beds.

On Thursday morning, I checked the state hospital dashboard again, hoping I'd see something to indicate this emergency executive order would help alleviate the terrifying number of beds remaining.

132 ICU beds remaining for adults. That's three fewer than the day before.

I checked the latest medical news to see what the Biden administration was doing to help. Medical military help is on its way to six states. Not Virginia.

Then I see another story on states with less than 10% ICU beds available. I thought for sure I'd see Virginia listed. Nope. But I did find another story where we made the "less than 15% ICU beds" list.

You might ask yourself, where are these numbers coming from?

Most information and headlines are coming from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data on hospitals. I checked out their website, picked the great state of Virginia, set up a 30-mile radius and began to look at hospitals in the Shenandoah Valley.

Augusta Health in Fishersville is listed as having a total of 12 ICU beds. Not 12 available. 12 total. The last update from Augusta Health stated they were at full capacity in their ICU and respiratory care units. Weeks ago, the hospital announced they activated their surge plan again.

Sentara RMH in Harrisonburg states it has 10 ICU beds occupied and a total of 32 ICU beds with 68.75% of inpatient ICU beds available.

I'm a writer, not a mathematician, but nothing about these numbers makes sense. Given the Omicron surge, I reached out to my press contacts at the hospitals to figure this out. If the Biden administration is making right-now decisions based on these numbers, I want the data to be as accurate and up to date as possible.

While waiting for clarification, a colleague at a USA TODAY Network paper said she encountered calls with hospitals where they admitted they are too short-staffed to update data. Even the Virginia Department of Health reminds its population that there is a lag in updating the numbers. It's understandable. We are now facing the fifth surge as Year Three of the pandemic kicks off.

Good news comes to Virginia medical cannabis patients to start the month

Department of Health Professions to get their medicine. [Cruelconsequences.org/Submitted](https://cruelconsequences.org/Submitted)

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<https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/2022/07/05/virginia-medical-cannabis-patients-do-not-need-to-register-for-va-medicine-marijuana-laws/65367388007/>

There are currently over 50,000 medical cannabis program registrants in Virginia. An [estimated 8,000 applicants](#) were still awaiting approval after registering with the Virginia Board of Pharmacy to obtain their medical marijuana card so they could get their medicine.

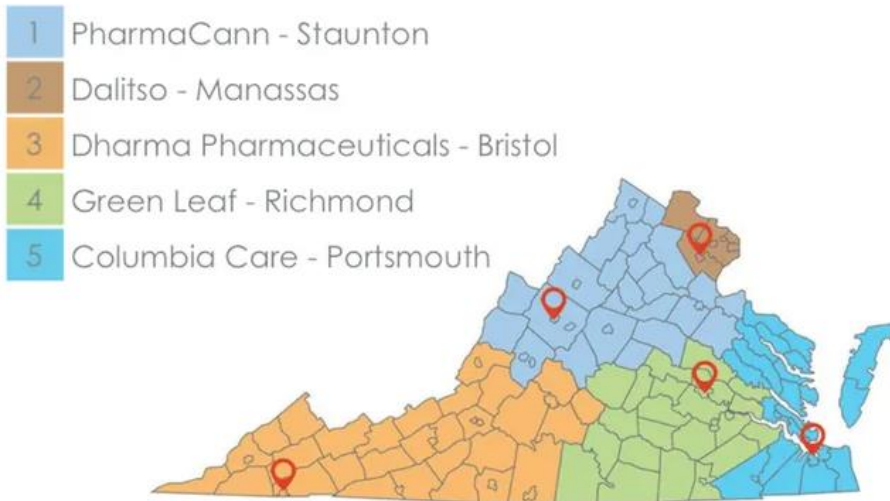
Now, these patients don't have to wait anymore.

Legislation signed earlier this year by Gov. Glenn Youngkin, [HB 933](#) and [SB 671](#) to eliminate the requirement that patients register with the Board of Pharmacy after receiving their written certification from a registered practitioner became law effective July 1.

“These legislative improvements will bring great relief to the thousands of Virginians who have been waiting to access the medical cannabis program,” said JM Pedini, executive director of [Virginia NORML](#). “We hear from dozens of Virginians each week who are struggling with the registration process and frustrated by the 60-day wait to receive their approval from the Board of Pharmacy,” Pedini added.

Patients will only need their written certification to shop at one of the state's medical cannabis dispensaries. Patients must still see a [registered practitioner](#) to obtain this certification and Registered Agents will still be required to register with the Virginia Board of Pharmacy.

Virginia medical cannabis dispensaries



Map of the five health service areas in Virginia. Currently, four health service areas have medical cannabis dispensaries open in the state. MedMen, the company that took over the facility license from PharmaCann, lost their conditional license from the Virginia Board of Pharmacy. As a result, there is no facility to serve health service region one as of July 5, 2022.
Virginia NORML/Submitted

There are five health service areas in the commonwealth that are part of the state's medical cannabis program. Currently, medical cannabis dispensaries are open (or soon will open) in four of the five health service areas. But health service area one (that includes Staunton, Augusta County and Waynesboro) does not have a dispensary where patients can get their medicine. Patients must travel to other areas in the state instead.

Why? Due to an [ongoing civil lawsuit](#) between MedMen (the company that took over the facility license that was going to open in Staunton), and the Virginia Board of Pharmacy; underway since a pretrial motion was held Dec. 18, 2020. On Jan. 14, 2021, Henrico County Circuit Court ordered the Virginia Board of Pharmacy to cease reviewing applications for a pharmaceutical processor permit in health service area one until further order by the court.

Patients have the option to travel to any of the medical cannabis dispensaries throughout the state to get their medicine.

Medical cannabis dispensaries in Virginia and their satellite locations:

Beyond/Hello, a [Jushi](#) brand

[Alexandria](#) (opening soon), 5902 Richmond Hwy, Alexandria

[Fairfax](#) (opening soon), 10521 Fairfax Blvd, Fairfax

[Manassas](#) (open), 8100 Albertstone Circle, Manassas, 703-420-4021

Sterling (open), 21290 Windmill Parc Drive, Sterling , 276-235-9700

Rise cannabis

Abingdon (open), 26864 Watauga Road, Abingdon, 276-644-6400

Christiansburg (open), 1675 Roanoke St., Christiansburg, 540-251-4406

Lynchburg (open), 1110 Campbell Ave., Lynchburg, 434-363-3436

Salem (open), 1634 W. Main St., Salem, 540-380-0420

gLeaf Medical Cannabis

Manchester (open), 2804 Decatur St, Building 30 Richmond, 800-484-0303

Short Pump (open), 11190 W. Broad St., Glen Allen, 804-613-5697

Carytown (opening August/September), 3100 W. Cary St., Richmond

Colonial Heights (opening August/September), 401 Southpark Blvd Colonial Heights

Columbia Care

Portsmouth (open) 4012 Seaboard Ct., Portsmouth, 757-315-6808

Cannabist

Virginia Beach (open) 535 N. Birdneck Road, Virginia Beach, 757-447-2303

Patients who would like to receive a physical card still have the option to request one by registering with the Virginia [Board of Pharmacy](#).

Diane Powers, communications director for the Virginia Department of Health Professions, told Richmond news station WRIC that the Board of Pharmacy will continue to process applications after July 1, even though medical cannabis cards will no longer be necessary under the new law.

A final cannabis-related amendment was put forth just prior to the last day of voting to ensure that medical cannabis cultivation is not interrupted should a processor relocate to a new facility, preventing disruption to product availability for patients, said Virginia NORML on their [website](#).