

Name _____

Date _____

Analyzing Watershed Health: Nitrates

Answer Key

What is Nutrient Pollution?

Nutrients are chemicals that plants and animals need to grow and survive. Nutrient pollution is the process where too many nutrients, mainly nitrogen and phosphorus, are added to bodies of water and act like fertilizer, causing excessive growth of algae.

Virtually all people and industries in the Chesapeake Bay watershed—and even some beyond the watershed—contribute nutrients to the bay and its tributaries. In general, excess nutrients reach the bay from three major sources:

- Wastewater treatment plants contribute the majority of nutrients that enter the bay by releasing treated water—often still containing large amounts of nutrients—into local streams and rivers, which eventually flow to the bay.
- Nutrients that run off the land—including farmland and urban and suburban areas—come from fertilizers, septic systems, boat discharges, and farm animal manure.
- Air pollution from vehicles, industries, gas-powered lawn tools and other emitting sources contribute nearly one-third of the total nitrogen load to the Chesapeake’s waterways.

Excessive amounts of nutrients can lead to more serious problems such as low levels of dissolved oxygen in the water. Severe algal growth blocks the sunlight that is needed for plants, such as bay grasses, to grow. When the algae and bay grass die, they decay. In the process of decay, the oxygen in the water is used up, leading to low levels of dissolved oxygen in the water. This, in turn, can kill fish, crabs, oysters, and other aquatic animals.

Scientists are most interested in the nutrients that are related to people living in the coastal zone because human-related inputs are much greater than natural inputs. Because there are increasingly more people living in coastal areas, there are more nutrients entering our coastal waters from wastewater treatment facilities, runoff from land in urban areas during rains, and from farming.

All of these factors can lead to increased nutrient pollution.

Analyzing Watershed Health: Nitrates

Answer Key, continued

Part 1. Explore nitrate levels in the Chesapeake Bay

Nitrates are a group of chemicals that contain nitrogen. An overabundance of nitrates in the Chesapeake Bay watershed can be harmful to humans. You can use FieldScope to explore nitrate levels throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed. CBIBS does not collect data on nitrates so it is important to note that the data you will be looking at has been collected by citizen scientists—these include scientists, students from local schools, residents from the area, and anyone else who is interested in collecting and sharing data about nitrates through FieldScope. This data may not be as reliable as the CBIBS data but it can still be useful to explore.

❶ Open the FieldScope map, **Nitrates in the Watershed**: <http://chesapeake.fieldscope.org/v3/maps/333>

❷ Examine the legend:

1. What do the numbers in the green circles represent? levels of nitrates (mg/L)
2. What do the size of the circles represent? larger circles indicate higher nitrate levels
3. In what parts of the Chesapeake Bay watershed do you observe higher nitrate levels? Why might this happen? There is usually one bigger circle near a city—indicating that one site is getting higher levels of nitrates than surrounding areas. There also appear to be some really large circles (greater than 10 mg/L) in very rural areas (near Thurmont, Maryland, for example). The high levels in cities could be due to nutrients in runoff. The high levels in rural areas could be due to animal waste and/or excess fertilizer usage.
4. What is the range of nitrate levels in the Chesapeake Bay? In other words, what is the highest observed nitrate level and what is the lowest? There is a wide range: from 0 to greater than 10mg/L

Analyzing Watershed Health: Nitrates

Answer Key, continued

5. When nitrate levels are high, how do you think aquatic life is affected? If nitrate levels are high, this could encourage algae growth. Ultimately, this will reduce levels of dissolved oxygen in the water, which will be detrimental to all aquatic organisms.

Part 2. Examine data for nitrates at the selected sites.

- 1 Continue your examination of the FieldScope map, **Nitrates in the Watershed**. [<http://chesapeake.fieldscope.org/v3/maps/333>]
 - 2 Zoom in to the selected sites to identify nitrate levels. (Tip: Enter the six sites, one at a time, in the search box.)
1. What are the nitrate levels at each site? Note that some sites may not have data exactly from the site. Select data that is close to each site. If there are two or more numbers close to the site, calculate an average. Hint: make sure you zoom into the site as much as you can.

Site	Nitrate Levels (mg/L)
Annapolis, Anne Arundel County, Maryland	1.0
Havre de Grace, Harford County, Maryland	0.76
Scotland, St. Mary's County, Maryland*	5.0
Alexandria, Alexandria County, Virginia	2.5
Norfolk, Virginia	2.5
Jamestown, Virginia	2.5

*Enter "Scotland, Maryland" in the search box and select St. Mary's County.

Analyzing Watershed Health: Nitrates

Answer Key, continued

When water has nitrate levels less than 1 mg/L, it is considered unpolluted. When nitrate levels are greater than 10mg/L, water is unsafe for drinking.

- In the chart above, draw a circle around the sites that have the highest nitrate levels. What sites have nitrate levels greater than 1 mg/L? Scotland, Maryland; Alexandria, Virginia; Norfolk, Virginia; and Jamestown, Virginia
- What site has the highest nitrate levels? What might be contributing to the nitrate levels at this site? Scotland, Maryland. It's possible that because this is a rural area, higher nitrate levels may be due to animal waste and/or the use of fertilizers on cropland.

Part 3. Water Flow to the Chesapeake

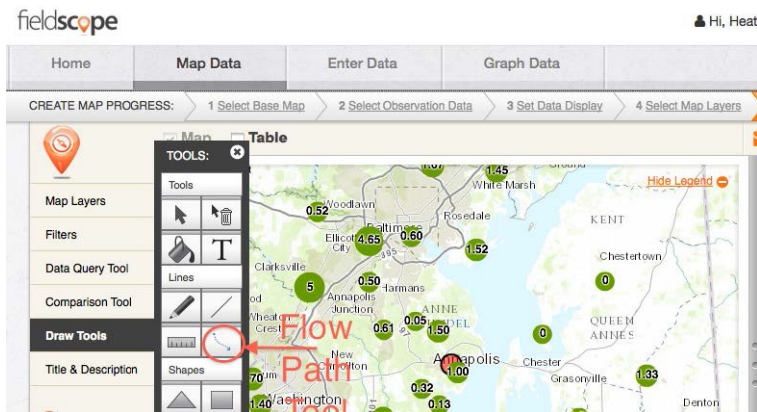
While nitrate levels are taken at different places, the nitrates themselves can follow a flow path to the larger Chesapeake Bay. For the action plan, it is important to know the distance and location of the flow paths from each site. FieldScope allows you to identify this flow path using a simple tool.

- Continue using the FieldScope map, **Nitrates in the Watershed**: <http://chesapeake.fieldscope.org/v3/maps/333>
- Enter "Annapolis, Maryland", in the search box.

Analyzing Watershed Health: Nitrates

Answer Key, continued

- 3 On the left tool bar, click on *Draw Tools*. Select the *Flow Path Tool*.



- 4 Click the map near Annapolis, Maryland, and the water flow path will appear as a blue line with the distance of that path to the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

1. Record this distance in the table below. Repeat the procedure for the other sites.

Site	Water Flow (miles)
Annapolis, Anne Arundel County, Maryland	8.3
Havre de Grace, Harford County, Maryland	2.7
Scotland, St. Mary's County, Maryland*	2
Alexandria, Alexandria County, Virginia	133
Norfolk, Virginia	15
Jamestown, Virginia	43

*Enter "Scotland, Maryland" in the search box and select St. Mary's County.

Analyzing Watershed Health: Nitrates

Answer Key, continued

2. What site has the longest flow path? Alexandria, Virginia

3. What site has the shortest flow path? Scotland, Maryland

Part 4. Chesapeake Bay Action Plan Connection

1. On your Project Data Table, record the average nitrate levels and water flow path distance for each site.
 - a. Go back to Part II, #2 of this worksheet, and copy the nitrate levels from this table to your larger Project Data Table.
 - b. Go back to Part III, #5 of this worksheet, and copy the water flow path distance from this table to your larger Project Data Table.

See Project Data Table answer key.

2. Complete the second box on your Decision Statement Planner worksheet to identify the best site for an action plan based on nitrate levels and water flow path distance. Refer to your Stakeholder Table as well to help you make this decision.

See Decision Statement Planner answer key.