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Debris from Conowingo Dam release signals greater threat from sediment pollution

Environmental Organizations point to dam release as reason to hold Exelon Corporation accountable during dam relicensing

(Baltimore, Md.) – Boaters, commercial watermen and shoreline communities are coping with large amounts of trash and debris in the Chesapeake Bay and its tidal waterways, a result of powerful floodwaters from last week’s storms. Large piles of woody debris, plastic and other floating debris are evident on many shorelines on the Western Shore of Maryland. Environmentalists say that the debris is only one visible part of the slug of pollution that entered the Bay when the Conowingo Dam opened 20 flood gates last week in response to several days of heavy rain upstream of the dam.

“The floating debris littering the Chesapeake Bay is like the tip of an iceberg,” said Ted Evgeniadis, Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper. “We see the debris because it floats, but underneath that is more pollution. And if the floodwaters were powerful enough to send all that trash downstream, imagine how much sediment pollution came with it. Unfortunately, that’s going to have a lasting impact on Bay water quality.”

Exelon Corporation owns and operates the dam for profit. Exelon is seeking a new 50-year license to operate the dam, but under federal law it needs the State of Maryland to certify that the dam operations will meet state water quality standards. Maryland issued its Water Quality Certification on April 27 and Exelon sued the State on May 25 in federal district court, challenging the state’s authority to require any pollution reduction from upstream sources. Waterkeepers Chesapeake and Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper filed to intervene in this case, supporting the State’s authority under the Clean Water Act.

“The aftermath of last week’s dam release underscores why it is so important to address the sediment pollution stored behind Conowingo Dam,” said Betsy Nicholas, executive director of Waterkeepers Chesapeake. “By suing the State, Exelon is seeking to disarm Maryland of one of its key tools to protect water quality in the relicensing process. While we feel that Maryland’s certification is missing some key elements, we absolutely support states’ authority to protect water quality and require power companies to reduce pollution from the operation of their dams.”

Since its construction in 1928, Conowingo Dam has trapped polluted sediment from the Susquehanna River and its 27,000-square-mile drainage area. Scientists have concluded that the dam’s reservoir is now at capacity and studies estimate that there are nearly 200 million tons of sediment, nutrients and other pollutants trapped behind the dam. During major floods caused by large storms, powerful

floodwaters can scoop out or “scour” the stored sediment behind the dam and send that downstream to the Chesapeake Bay in the form of pollution.

Waterkeepers Chesapeake and Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper called on other environmental organizations to intervene in the lawsuit to support the State’s authority under the Clean Water Act.

“This is our only opportunity in the next 50 years to get meaningful pollution reductions at Conowingo Dam – we have to hold Exelon accountable for its fair share of the cleanup,” said Nicholas.

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***Waterkeepers Chesapeake** is a coalition of nineteen independent programs working to make the waters of the Chesapeake and Coastal Bays swimmable and fishable. www.waterkeeperschesapeake.org*

*The **Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper Association** is a non-profit watershed association that advocates for safe drinking water, sustainable use of natural resources, and the ability to fish and swim in the Susquehanna River and her tributaries*