Government Reform Committee
"Ova-Pollution in the Potomac: Egg-Bearing Male Bass and Implications for Human and Ecological Health"

Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis

October 4, 2006

Good afternoon, and welcome to this oversight hearing on egg-bearing male fish in the Potomac River. Recent *Washington Post* stories on this topic have spawned a great deal of interest, and justifiable concern, about the implications of this odd phenomenon for the environment, for the fish and for us. So today we will hear from those who watch over what goes into, and what comes out of, a vital regional waterway, the Potomac River.

First, let's understand just how far and wide the Potomac reaches. If you look at the green line on this map, you will see that the river runs from West Virginia to the Chesapeake Bay. Its uses are as varied as the communities through which it meanders. Humans use it for boating and recreational fishing. Fish and wildlife use it as their habitat. And local utilities use it to provide drinking water. In other words, what happens in the Potomac doesn't affect only one species of fish in Washington, D.C. It has repercussions for all the life that thrives on its flow.

So, what about these fish that scientists have found in our river? Do they have three heads? Three eyes? Are they growing legs? No. That's not the case at all. The findings by the US Geological Survey and the Fish and Wildlife Service are far subtler—but troubling nevertheless. What they and other researchers have found is egg yolk and immature ova being produced in male reproductive organs. That's what is ***known***. Still ***unknown*** are the exact causes, pathways and mechanisms of this unusual biological activity.

Some believe the fish could be reacting to organic chemical compounds such as human estrogen from processed sewage or animal estrogen from agricultural runoff. There is also the possibility the reaction is being triggered by manmade chemicals in pesticides and cosmetics. Or, it could be a combination of both. These questions are still under investigation, and we look forward to hearing from Department of Interior representatives about their research and findings.

So, what about the drinking water coming from the Potomac? How safe is it, and who is responsible for keeping it safe? This seemingly straightforward question has a complicated answer. In 1974, Congress passed the **Safe Drinking Water Act** requiring the Environmental Protection Agency to set standards and testing requirements for contaminants. Those requirements are then implemented

by the states. Because it runs through so many jurisdictions, the Potomac presents an interesting and challenging case. Testimony by our witnesses today will shed some light on the difficulties of navigating through the twisting rapids and rocky shoals of federal and state water quality regulations.

The good news is that many water utilities meet ***or exceed*** current EPA standards. But the menu of chemicals and contaminants finding their way into our waters is constantly changing. And the science of detecting and eliminating those contaminants, frankly, has to play catch-up. EPA, along with other federal agencies, has been studying chemicals and compounds thought to be causing the "intersex" fish phenomenon. We will hear from them, and from local water utilities, on how they advance the science and maintain vigilant testing regimes to keep harmful compounds out of our water.

At the end of the day, researchers have not yet determined what is scrambling the bass eggs. The preliminary conclusion as of now is that the fish "ova-pollution" probably has no impact on human health. Still, as the Chairman of the House Committee with jurisdiction over the District of Columbia, and as the co-chair of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Task Force, I and many others want to know more. We need to be certain these sensitive biological markers are being

monitored and studied so we can detect and eliminate potentially harmful substances from the river ecosystem before they cause downstream environmental or human health effects.

I would like to thank our witnesses for being here today, and we look forward to hearing from each of you.

ATTACHMENT 1 – Potomac River