

ATTACHMENT 4.1-D: TRASH BOATS ON PHILADELPHIA RIVERS

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Trash boats on the Schuylkill and the Delaware pull 44 tons of garbage a year from our rivers



A strange thing about the two rivers bordering Philadelphia: Nobody is completely responsible for cleaning them. The Schuylkill and the Delaware could turn to into sludge and for many years they nearly did.

In the first half of the 20th century, even fish couldn't swim through a 20-mile stretch of the Delaware River encompassing the Philadelphia area. It was [an oxygen dead zone](#). People weren't even supposed to breathe the air around it.

Ships could only pass through at their own risk.

"It was so polluted it would make ships hulls rust just as fast as they could paint them," said Shaun Bailey, the marketing and communications coordinator for the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary.

Based on his organization's latest reports and consensus from other groups, Bailey said the health of the Delaware Bay and Estuary, which includes the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers, stands at about a B+ or B- right now. Considering their health used to be an F, that's not bad. But how much more attentions do the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers need to really get clean? And what is the city of Philadelphia doing about it?

Again, no one has a clear responsibility for the Delaware Bay and Estuary, which spans Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and a little bit of New York. That means the rivers are part of several different jurisdictions. To increase cooperation between local governments and nonprofits, the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary has started the Schuylkill Action Network. It's a membership driven group but is coordinated by the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary Network. Members include the Philadelphia Water Department.

Maybe you've seen one of their ships while jogging along the Schuylkill River Trail or hanging out at Penn's Landing. They've been sending them out to pick up debris and trash since 2007.



That's the smaller skimmer. It doesn't have a name. They have two such watercraft; the larger is called the R.E. Ro, which operates in the tidal reaches of the Schuylkill and the Delaware, for a total of 32 river miles. The smaller boat operates in the non-tidal part of the Schuylkill, north of the Fairmount Dam

by the Art Museum. They basically function like garbage trucks but in the water, with employees picking up trash and debris.

And they find a lot of it. The R.E. Roy has picked up anywhere from 11 tons to 44 tons of marine debris each year since 2007. The smaller one has collected anywhere from .5 tons to 4 tons per year. Combined, they're on the water usually at least five days a week for about eight months out of the year.



R. E. Roy

PHILADELPHIA WATER DEPARTMENT

Plastic materials account for about 56 percent of the debris they pick up. And of that plastic material, bottles make up 77 percent of the river litter, followed by plastic bags at 16 percent. Since last year, the Water Department has worked with the Streets Department to recycle some of the plastics. Besides plastics, other debris commonly found in the river includes clothes, Styrofoam, tires and

construction material.

The trash generally doesn't get there from people illegally dumping in the rivers or on the shorelines. It's the garden-variety litter seen on Philly's streets every day. That litter is carried into storm drains and into the Delaware and Schuylkill.

"A lot of people would never guess that cigarette butt or that pop bottle makes its way down into the river," said Tammy Becker, programs manager for the river-cleaning national nonprofit Living Lands and Water. "But it certainly does."

Despite the Water Department's efforts, the rivers could always use more attention, especially the Delaware. Living Lands and Waters led a volunteer group of cleaners in the Delaware this August, partnering with the Water Department, Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful and the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary among others. They brought five 30-foot-long boats and handpicked nearly 33,000 pounds of garbage from the river and shorelines.

The staff of Living Lands and Waters has cleaned rivers throughout the country. The Delaware, particularly by Philly and Camden, was rough.

"Honestly, it's one of the worst places we've worked at," Becker said. "It's up there."

That's not good. But Becker reminds that the Delaware is still a work in progress. Not many other cities have boats continually patrolling waterways and picking up trash, like Philly does.

"The city of Philadelphia," she said, "has taken some really progressive steps to get it under control."