



**Northern Virginia
Clean Water Partners**

2026 ANNUAL SUMMARY OF RESULTS

July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026

Stormwater Pollution in Northern Virginia

Water bodies in Northern Virginia, including the region's numerous streams, lakes, and rivers, provide a range of environmental, social, and economic benefits to surrounding communities. However, when waterways are polluted and water quality becomes impaired, their key resources are reduced and result in negative impacts to both humans and the natural environment.

Polluted stormwater runoff is the number one cause of poor water quality in Northern Virginia's waterways. When it rains and snows, water runs off streets, driveways, yards, and parking lots and mixes with pollutants, such as litter, fertilizer, pet waste, road salt, and auto fluids. These pollutants then flow into storm drains on the street and are discharged directly into nearby streams.

To reduce the impacts of pollution, the Northern Virginia Clean Water Partners joined together in 2003 to improve residents' stormwater-related knowledge and behaviors through an ongoing public education campaign for the region.

About the Partnership

The Northern Virginia Clean Water Partners (NVCWP) is composed of a group of over 20 local governments, public schools, drinking water and sanitation authorities, and businesses in the region. Together, the NVCWP shares the common goals to keep Northern Virginia residents healthy and safe by reducing the amount of pollution from stormwater runoff that reaches local creeks and rivers, and to empower individuals to take action in their own communities.

To meet these goals, the partners work together to:

- Identify high priority water quality issues for the region
- Identify the target audience(s) for outreach
- Educate the region's residents on simple ways to reduce pollution around their homes
- Monitor changes in behavior through surveys and other data collection techniques
- Pilot new cost-effective opportunities for public outreach and education

Membership is voluntary and each member makes an annual contribution to fund the program. By working together, the partners are able to leverage their funds to develop and implement a range of bilingual education and outreach strategies throughout Northern Virginia.

The 2026 campaign helped to satisfy MS4 (Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System) Phase I and Phase II permit requirements for stormwater education and documenting changes in behavior.



[Learn more at Onlyrain.org](https://www.Onlyrain.org)

2026 Campaign Overview

The Northern Virginia Clean Water Partners continued to highlight the following high priority pollutants for their 2026 campaign:

- **Nutrients (Phosphorus and Nitrogen)**
- **Bacteria**
- **Salt**
- **Illicit Discharges (e.g., pesticides, motor oil, paint)**

Target audiences for these issues include, but are not limited to, pet owners, winter salt applicators, home mechanics, and residents with lawns or gardens. To reach these groups, the 2026 campaign employed a mix of social media, television and other paid advertising, printed materials, and the Only Rain website to share messaging aimed at improving knowledge and behaviors around stormwater pollution. In addition, partners engaged residents directly through event tabling and other in-person activities throughout the year, further raising awareness of the campaign.

The 2026 campaign also aimed to strengthen its outreach and engagement efforts through enhanced social marketing tools, including new education materials, refined paid advertising strategies (such as the use of Microsoft and Google Ads), and an updated Clean Water Pledge.

Social Media Highlights

The NVCWP expanded its social media presence in 2026, achieving consistent growth on Instagram and Facebook platforms. In response to other shifting platform usage trends, the NVCWP discontinued its X and Threads accounts and launched a LinkedIn account to reach audiences who value networking and professional content but may not engage with other social media channels.

Key Metrics			
New Followers	56	132	71
Total Followers	733	402	86
Total Posts	124	104	104
Total Post Clicks	19.8K	9.9K	3.9K
Total Post Engagements	2.2K	1.1K	620

Video Advertisements

The 2026 campaign engaged residents through two video advertisements focusing on residential stormwater management actions. The campaign aired the videos in English and Spanish across mobile, desktop, and standard TV platforms with 10,511 ads on standard TV alone. In total, the videos generated 1,521,694 impressions, or views, across all platforms.

2026 Key Campaign Metrics



Social Media Impressions*
2,358,930



Post Clicks
33,637



E-Newsletter Subscribers
2,469



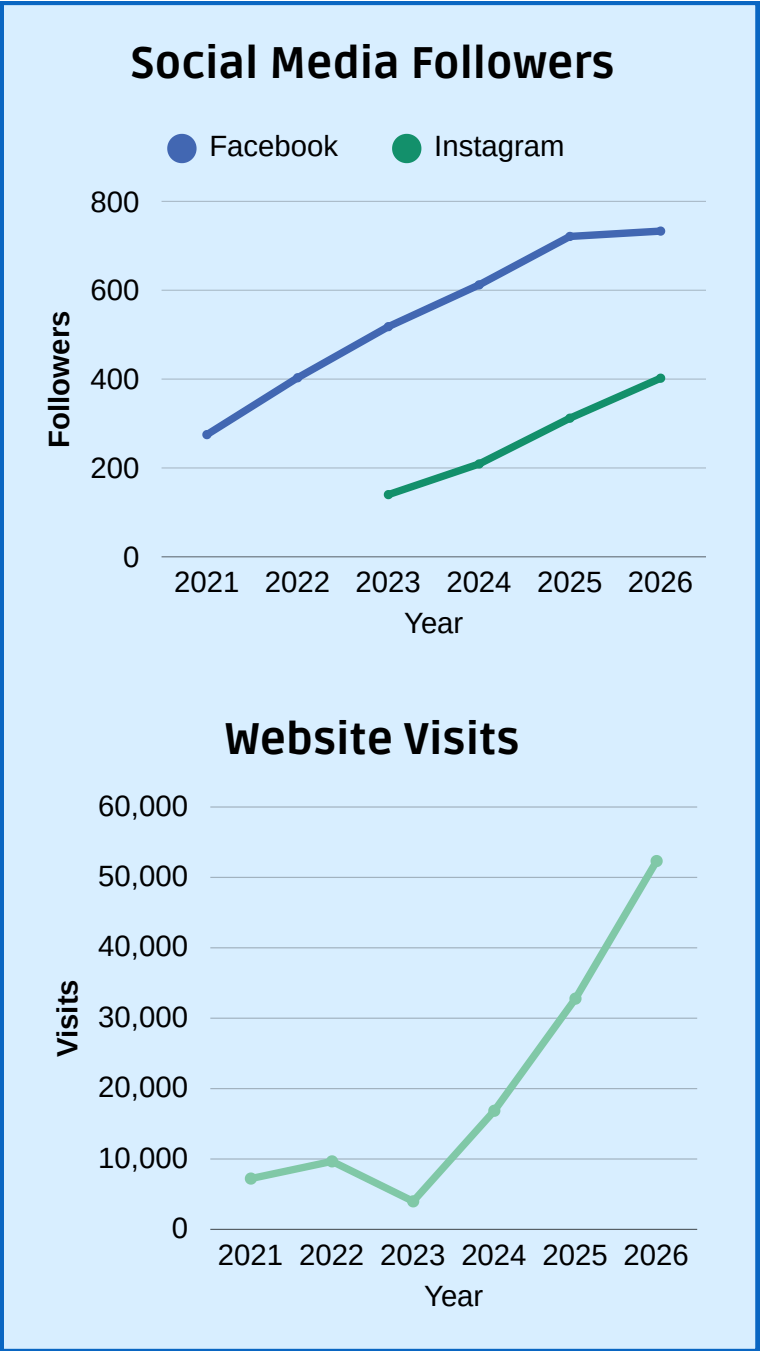
Non-Social Media Impressions**
549,964



Video Ad Impressions*
1,521,694



Website Visits
52,324



*Impressions are the number of times an ad appeared on a TV, computer, or other electronic device.

**Non-social media impressions include impressions on Google Search, Reddit, and other websites outside of Twitter/X and Meta platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Threads).

Annual Stormwater Survey

The Northern Virginia Clean Water Partners conduct an annual online survey of approximately 500 residents in the region to better understand their stormwater-related knowledge and behaviors over time. Survey results help the partners to assess their campaign's effectiveness and improve future education and outreach efforts.

Survey Findings

Stormwater and Watershed Knowledge

In an increase from previous years, 76% of Northern Virginia residents reported that they are familiar with the term "watershed". When asked which watershed they live in though, 45% of residents selected that they live in the Potomac River watershed, while 31% indicated that they live in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

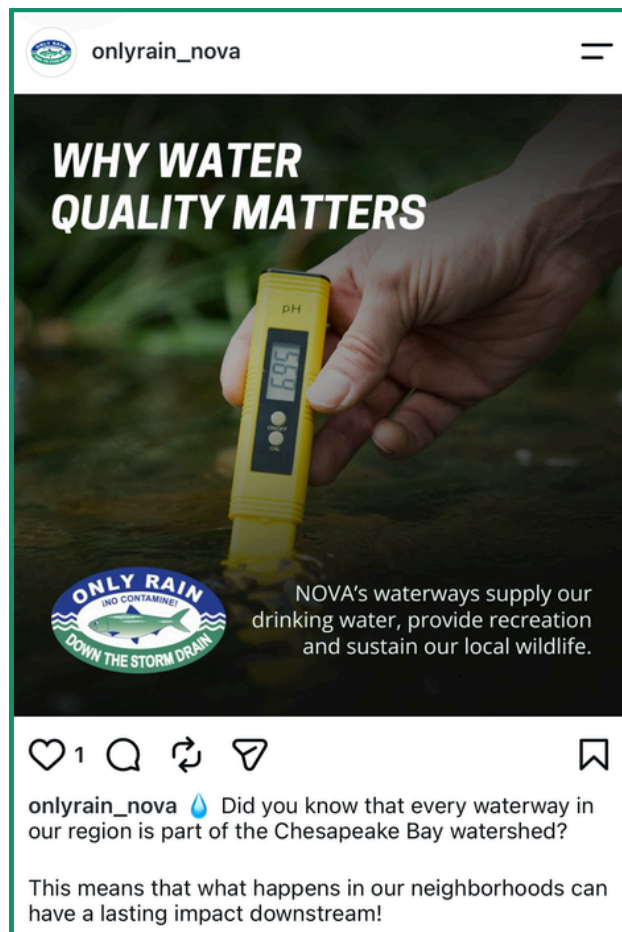
When asked where stormwater eventually ends up, 42% of residents responded that it goes to the Potomac River or Chesapeake Bay, and 18% selected that it only goes to a wastewater treatment plant. 33% reported that it ends up at both destinations. Overall, while survey findings indicate improving awareness of watershed terminology, messaging should continue to focus on stormwater flow paths and destinations in Northern Virginia and the broader Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Information and Advertising

As in past surveys, about one-quarter (27%) of residents reported that they have seen or received at least some form of information about reducing water pollution in the past 12 months. Of those who were aware of an event for water quality improvement, such as stream clean ups and storm drain stenciling, 54% actually participated in the event.

40% of respondents indicated that they were familiar with the NVCWP prior to the survey. When shown the "only rain down the storm drain" fish logo, 56% reported having seen it previously. Both figures remain similar to 2024 and 2025 results. However, trust and outreach indicators increased from previous years: 80% selected that they trust the NVCWP, and 74% said that they would contact the NVCWP with questions or concerns about water quality.

These results underscore the NVCWP's increasing use of the "Only Rain" logo over the past year, as well as the value of sharing trustworthy, science-based information through social media, the NVCWP website, and outreach materials. In the coming year, the partners will continue to share water quality improvement events, easily digestible messaging, and other tools to further build familiarity.



Campaign Impact

Residents who had seen at least one NVCWP video ad were asked a series of questions about the ads' impact, including how their attitudes and behaviors toward different forms of pollution have changed as a result. Mirroring previous years, over 90% of respondents reported a greater understanding of how pet waste, fertilizer, and motor oil affect local water quality. Notably, there was an increase in residents who are now taking action to reduce pollution: 80% stated that they pick up more pet waste, 81% fertilize less frequently, and 89% now dispose of motor oil properly.

Resident Behaviors

The survey asked specific questions to understand changes in Northern Virginia residents' behaviors around relevant stormwater management and pollution issues, including pet waste, lawn and garden care, winter salt, car fluids, and household hazardous waste.

Household Waste Drop-Offs

About two-thirds of residents (66%) reported needing to dispose of Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) at some point, and 67% said they know if their locality has a specific HHW drop-off location.

The 2026 survey also asked new questions about bulk trash (e.g., furniture, appliances, mattresses) and HHW disposal methods. Results showed that 47% of residents use a municipal facility to dispose of HHW, while 13% take it to a collection event and 13% dispose of it with regular household waste.

For bulk waste, residents most commonly schedule a pickup with municipal or private waste removal services (47%), donate them to charity or thrift stores (36%), or take items to a landfill (31%). Additionally, 19% of residents reported having left items on a street curb, and 10% reported placing them with regular household waste.



Dog Waste

Responses to questions about dog waste pick-up have not changed significantly over the past four years. About half of residents (49%) reported owning at least one dog, and among those who walk their dog, 91% stated that they always or usually pick up their dog's waste during walks. The majority of residents continue to pick up after their pet in their own yard on a daily basis (62%), while 28% do so on a weekly basis.

On the other hand, when asked why they pick up their dog's waste, responses varied from previous years: residents most frequently selected that "it's what good neighbors do" (25%), followed by concerns about water pollution (22%). Only 19% of residents cited a city or county ordinance as their reason for picking up pet waste, though this response increased from 2025 (11%).

Pollution Reporting

When asked about reporting potential water pollution, 52% of residents stated that they know who to contact. Over two-thirds (70%) also indicated that they would probably or definitely contact someone to report a potential source of water pollution, representing a steady increase in this response over the past five years.

Among those who were equally likely to call or not call to report potential pollution, as well as those who would not call, a quarter (25%) selected "it's none of my business," 23% selected not wanting to communicate with authorities, and 19% selected "other." These findings suggest that while most residents can identify and are willing to report water pollution, campaign messaging should continue to clarify reporting pathways to reduce hesitancy and make the process easier.

Stormwater Management Features

Survey respondents were given descriptions of rain barrels, rain gardens, and conservation landscaping, then asked whether they had heard of each stormwater management feature and would be interested in installing one on their property. Rain barrels emerged as the most familiar option (76%), and interest in installing one has grown, rising from 35% in 2025 to 43% in 2026.

Rain gardens remained the least familiar feature, though over a third of residents (37%) expressed interest in adding one to their property. Moreover, despite rain barrels having the highest familiarity, more residents reported having conservation landscaping installed than either of the other two features. This is likely due to the many different ways it can be incorporated into a lawn or garden.



Winter Salt

Since 2024, respondents have been asked about their attitudes and behaviors around snow and ice maintenance, including their use of deicers (e.g., road salt) and abrasives (e.g., sand). Two in five residents (40%) reported always or frequently applying deicers at their residence during snowy and icy conditions, while 22% said the same for abrasives. In addition, there was a fairly even spread among those who apply deicers before (37%), during (27%), or after storm events (31%), while 14% stated that the timing of their application varies.

Respondents were also asked to share their positive or negative perceptions of road salt application. Most residents maintained positive perceptions when it comes to emergency vehicle safety (63%), motorist safety (67%), and pedestrian safety (71%). Yet, in a jump from 2025 (40%), nearly half of residents (48%) noted that it has a negative impact on local waterways. While awareness of road salt's impacts on local waterways continues to grow, residents still hold favorable perceptions of its effect on drinking water. This disparity underscores the need for future messaging to more clearly establish the connection between road salt, waterway health, and local drinking water supply.

Vehicle Maintenance

Residents' vehicle-washing behaviors have been consistent over the past several years. Among those who own or lease a car, nearly two-thirds (62%) reported taking their vehicle to a commercial car wash, while 39% washed their vehicle at home in the past year. The frequency and methods of washing (i.e., use of environmentally-friendly detergent or water) have also largely stayed the same.

As with past years, 67% of residents reported going to an auto center for oil changes, and 20% take their used motor oil to a gas station or hazmat facility for recycling. The remaining 13% of respondents noted that they store used motor oil in their garage, place it in the trash, or dump it down a storm drain, sink, or onto the ground.



Lawn and Garden Care

67% of residents with a lawn or garden reported using a lawn care service at least once a year. The majority of residents with a lawn or garden continue to fertilize at least once a year, and over one-third fertilize twice a year (36%). Echoing previous results, 13% reported never fertilizing, and 11% only do so if a soil test recommends it.

When asked how they dispose of grass clippings, 41% of residents reported either bagging clippings for composting/recycling or placing them in a compost bin. Nearly one-quarter (23%) bag clippings and place them in the trash, while 37% leave them on the lawn or garden. If grass clippings end up in the street, 65% of residents reported sweeping or blowing them back onto their lawn, 18% leave them in the street, and 17% sweep them into the storm drain.



2026 Campaign Goals

The Northern Virginia Clean Water Partners look forward to enhancing the annual campaign in the coming year through new social marketing initiatives, including:

- Stakeholder research and guidance to better reach local community groups, businesses, and other new audiences
- New graphics and outreach materials to share at tabling and other outreach events
- Updated Spanish language translations for Onlyrain.org and Spanish advertising on social media

2026 Stormwater Survey at a Glance

The Northern Virginia Clean Water Partners (NVCWP) conduct an annual survey to better understand Northern Virginia residents' stormwater knowledge and behaviors and help inform future education and outreach efforts.

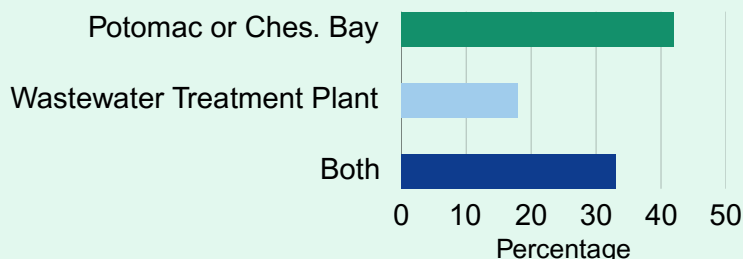


Stormwater & Watershed Knowledge



Over three-quarters of residents (**76%**) were familiar with the term "watershed" prior to the survey. However, only **31%** stated that they live in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

When asked where stormwater ends up, residents responded that it goes to...



Pollution Reporting

70% of residents would probably or definitely report potential pollution to their town or county, but only **52%** think they know who to call for reporting.



Winter Salt

40%

always or frequently apply deicer (e.g., salt) at their residence during snowy or icy conditions.



Vehicle Maintenance



The majority of vehicle owners (**67%**) use a garage or oil change service to dispose of motor oil.

62%

have taken their vehicle to a commercial car wash over the past year, while **39%** washed their car at home.



Pet Waste

91%

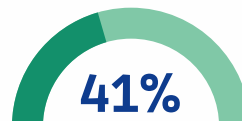
of dog owners report always or usually picking up their pet's waste during a walk, while only **62%** pick up the waste in their yard on a daily basis.



Lawn and Garden Care

76%

of residents fertilize their lawn or garden at least once a year. **24%** either never fertilize or only fertilize when a soil test recommends it.



bag their grass clippings for composting/recycling or put them in a compost bin.

Additional Information

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- **LinkedIn:** linkedin.com/company/only-rain
- **Instagram:** instagram.com/novacwp



2026 Clean Water Partners:

Fairfax County | Arlington County | Loudoun County | Loudoun Water | Fairfax Water | City of Alexandria | City of Fairfax | City of Falls Church | City of Manassas | City of Manassas Park | Stafford County | Town of Leesburg | Town of Dumfries | Town of Herndon | Town of Vienna | Prince William County | Prince William Water | Northern Virginia Regional Commission | George Mason University | Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program | Fairfax County Public Schools | Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District | Prince William County Public Schools

This summary was produced by the Northern Virginia Regional Commission on behalf of the 2026 Clean Water Partners.

