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What's polluting the Wallkill River? Feces

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NEW PALTZ -- It's a question that goes to the heart of a new effort to reclaim the Wallkill River for safe swimming: just how badly polluted is it?

Dan Shapley, water quality program manager for Riverkeeper, quantified the question at a well-attended gathering at SUNY New Paltz on Thursday.

For the past three years, Riverkeeper has tested the river for fecal contamination and found that 87 percent of the samples taken from 21 sites along the river exceeded EPA guidelines for swimming.

Shapley said after the gathering that while it's difficult to assess exactly where the fecal contamination comes from, it's safe to say "it's not because of otters."

Human waste, often the result of damaged or insufficient sewer systems, is usually to blame, though the contamination also involves manure runoff from farms and contributions from cattle and horses along the river's watershed.

Dire as the numbers may sound, Shapley sounded an optimistic note by saying he saw evidence of improvement along the river's New Jersey-New York border and at the border of Orange and Ulster counties.

"There's evidence in the data we've collected that we can act locally and reduce pollution, that it's all not a matter of blaming it on 'upstream' conditions."

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