

Chairman John Joyce Opening Statement
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Hearing
“Corrosion, Collapse, and Clean-Up: Examining the
Potomac Interceptor Collapse”
May 20, 2026

Good morning, and welcome to today’s hearing titled, “Corrosion, Collapse, and Clean-Up: Examining the Potomac Interceptor Collapse.”

Today’s hearing will examine the collapse of DC Water’s Potomac Interceptor—a 54-mile sanitary sewer system that runs through parts of Virginia, Maryland, and DC. The collapse, which occurred on January 19, resulted in hundreds of gallons of untreated sewage overflowing onto nearby land and down to the Potomac River.

This incident raises serious concerns about the resilience of critical wastewater infrastructure, and the impact that collapses or breaks like this can have on our communities, including on safe drinking water, public health, the environment, and local businesses.

The Potomac Interceptor is a vital component of the region’s critical wastewater infrastructure. When it failed, it

caused over 240 million gallons of wastewater to overflow into the Potomac River, threatening water quality, ecosystems, and the health of surrounding communities that rely on this river for recreation, fish and shellfish harvesting, and safe drinking water once treated.

Fortunately, because of where the collapse happened, the incident did not affect safe drinking water. But if the break had happened just a few miles upstream, it would have been a much different story.

Still, the collapse had far-reaching impacts on the region. From a public health perspective, exposure to untreated wastewater can carry harmful pathogens and pollutants, posing serious health risks to anyone near the affected areas.

Environmentally, wastewater discharge can degrade aquatic habitats, harm wildlife, and have impacts on native species. Economically, the effects ripple outward, impacting local businesses, tourism, fisheries, some of which claim they have lost thousands of dollars of revenue

due to public perception of the cleanliness of the river following this incident.¹

This incident raises questions about the management and oversight of this critical infrastructure. What led to the collapse? Was this failure preventable? Were there warning signs that were missed or ignored? Did permitting requirements create unnecessary delays in moving forward with needed repairs? Given the age and condition of the Potomac Interceptor, what is known about other vulnerabilities in the pipe and what is being done to prevent another break or collapse from happening?

Equally important is understanding the roles and responsibilities of other entities as it relates to the Potomac Interceptor. DC Water owns and operates the Potomac Interceptor, but multiple agencies and jurisdictions have roles and responsibilities with respect to permitting and regulatory oversight, or have helped respond to the collapse, including federal partners such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Army Corps of

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2026/05/01/sewage-spill-potomac-river-business/?_pml=1

Engineers, and the National Park Service, as well as state and regional authorities.

Today's hearing is about identifying failures or gaps, strengthening oversight, and ensuring that our infrastructure systems are equipped to protect the public and the environment in the face of growing demands and aging assets.

We owe it to the American people to fully understand the causes and consequences of this failure—and to take meaningful steps to prevent similar incidents in the future.

While this hearing will focus on the Potomac Interceptor, aging wastewater infrastructure is a nationwide problem. A thorough investigation into the lead up to this incident and the response following it is critical to establish how best to repair similar infrastructure and to prevent another large-scale spill. The facts established by this hearing can help us protect the health and safety of the communities that all of us represent.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today. We look forward to hearing from you to learn more about the incident and lessons learned.

With that, I now recognize our Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Ms. Clarke, for her opening statement.