

# ***Opinions about Trash*** ***Research in the Potomac River Watershed***

**Conducted for**  
**The Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative**  
**Spring 2008**

**With thanks to the project's funders**  
**Arlington County**  
**District of Columbia**  
**Montgomery County**  
**Prince George's County**  
**City of Rockville**

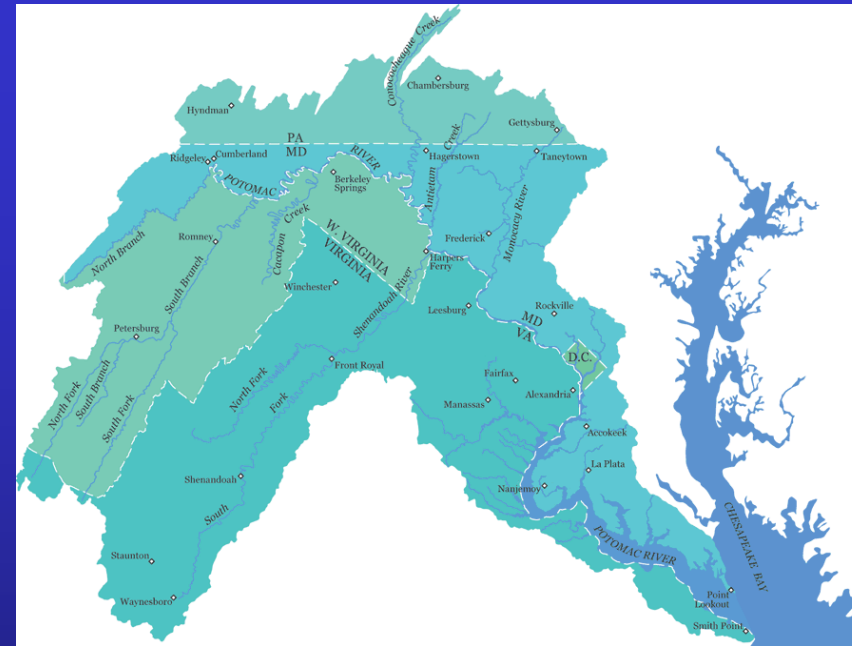
**Research conducted by:**  
**OpinionWorks**  
*Finding Insights That Bring Results*  
[www.OpinionWorks.com](http://www.OpinionWorks.com)

# Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

## Research Methodology

### Regional Telephone Survey

- 1,004 interviews.
- Interviews conducted Jan 23 – Feb 2.
- Adults 17+ randomly sampled across the watershed.
- 13 minute interview on average.
- Cell phones, Spanish language, young males all actively sought.
- Final results weighted to reflect Census numbers.
- Can look at major jurisdictions with confidence.



# Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

## *Research Methodology*

### Step 2: Focus Groups

- Conducted among our target audience.
- April 2008.
- 8-12 admitted litterers with our facilitator in each group.
- 120-minute discussion allows in-depth probing of thoughts, feelings.
- Test media from other markets to learn what resonates here.
- Outcome is raw material for creative development.

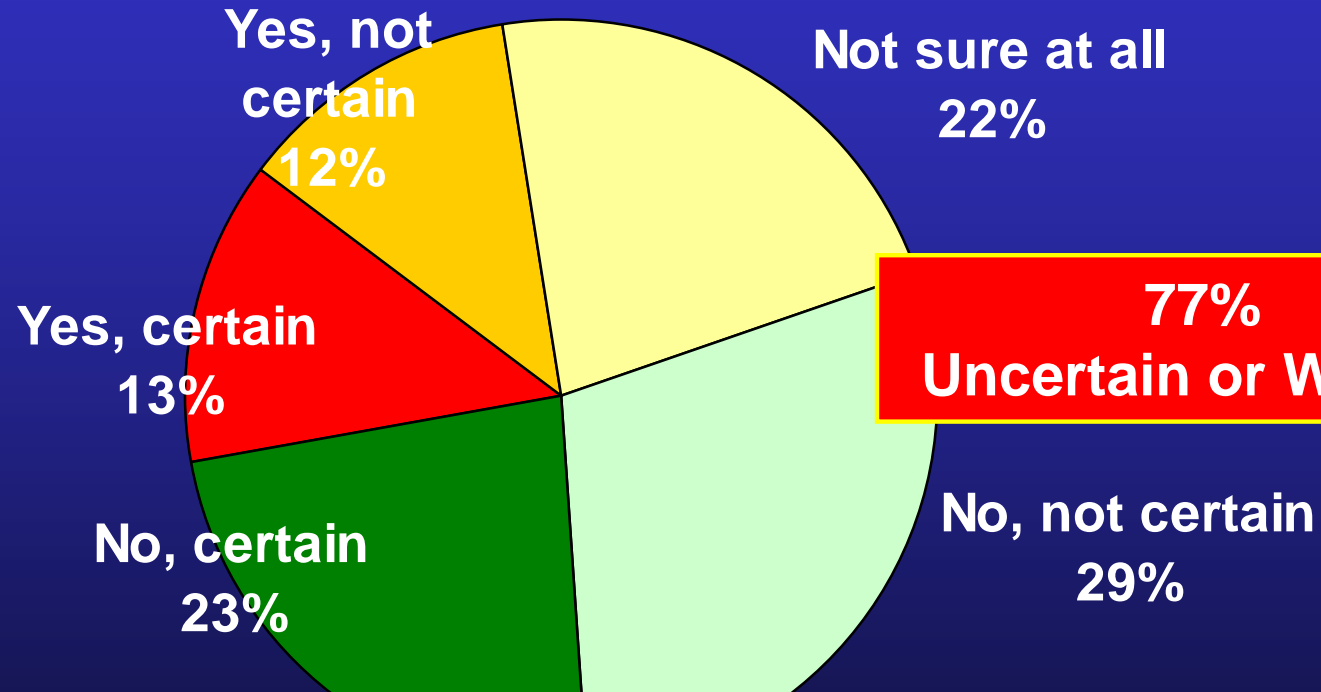


***Finding:***

***The public is unknowledgeable  
about how land-based litter  
becomes water-based trash.***

# Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

## Is Litter Filtered Out of Stormwater?



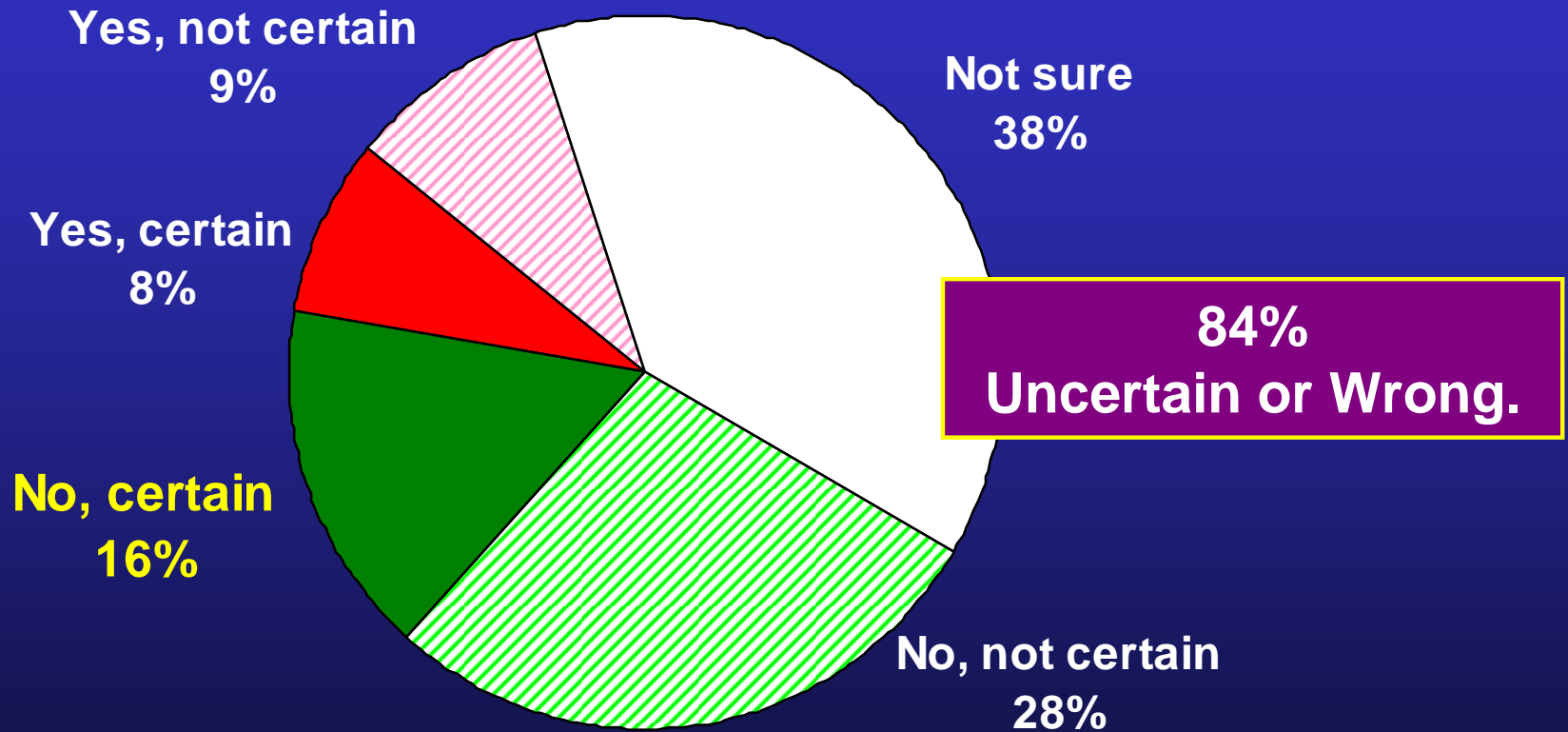
**Only 58% can picture a storm drain near where they live.  
24% admit they do not know storm drains return water to area rivers.**

**“As far as you know, is litter that is washed down the storm drain or catch basin filtered out before it reaches area waterways?”**

**(If yes or no): “Are you certain or not so certain about that?”**

# Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

## Is Stormwater Treated?



### 2007 Baltimore Stormwater Study

“As far as you know, is the rain water that runs down your local storm drain treated before it is released into the area waterways?”

(If yes or no): “Are you certain or not so certain about that?”

# Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

## Do you live in the Potomac River Watershed?

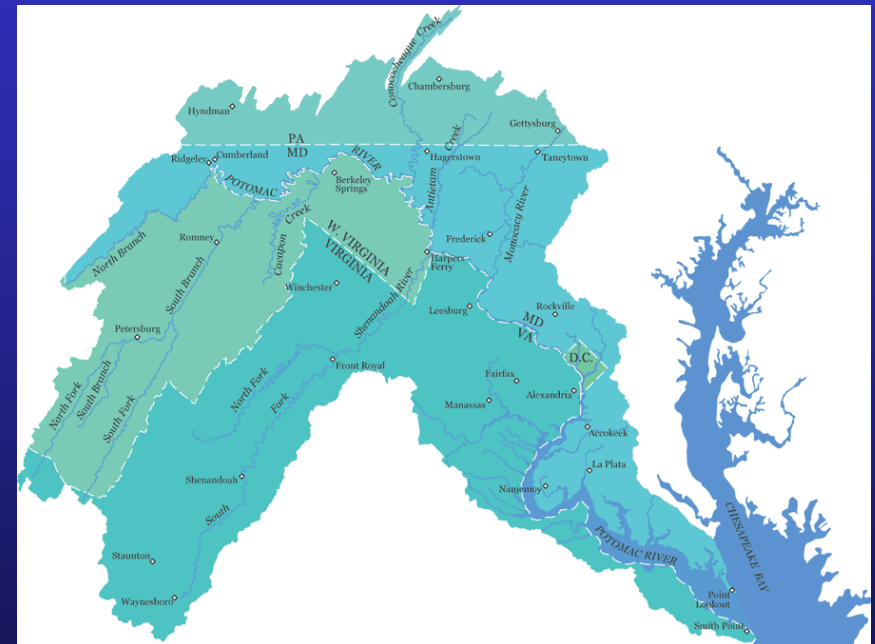
Real answer: 100%

Respondents:

42% Yes

22% No, Live outside it

35% I Don't Know



58% Uncertain or Wrong.

“Do you live in the Potomac River watershed, live outside of it, or don't you know for sure?”

# Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

## Admitted Littering Behavior

Admits to littering a food wrapper or packaging	7%
<i>If under age 25</i>	<i>29%</i>
Admits to littering box or bag of trash	3%
<i>If male and under age 25</i>	<i>11%</i>

**Littering most common among middle-income.  
Race and ethnicity are not strong predictors of littering behavior.**

**“Probably everybody drops things on the ground or tosses them from a car window from time to time because they are not near a trash can. I’d like to ask you whether you have ever dropped, tossed, or dumped any of these things over the past couple of years or so.”**



***Some insights from the focus groups into why people litter.***

## Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

# Why People Litter: It's Convenient

MODERATOR: 'I would litter less if there were more trashcans.' You disagree with that?

**"Yeah, because like he said, there is a lot of trashcans downtown. People go outside and they still litter. It's a habit that people got. People just chew gum and just throw the wrapper down."**

MODERATOR: Why do you think people do that?

**"Because it's convenient."**

**"Yeah, it's more convenient."**

**"It's like instead of holding this wrapper until I get to a trashcan, just drop it. It's so small you just..."**

**"No one will see it."**

**"Or taking a piece of gum and then trying to find a trashcan."**

**"Cigarettes. It's like pluck the ash, whatever."**

**"Or when you are finished you pluck it because..."**

**"It's over."**

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**“It’s Over”**

***“Last night when I was leaving from playing basketball my shirt was wet. I just took it off and changed my shirt. Threw the shirt away on the ground.”***

~

***“The situations that I find myself a lot in is like if I have a beer bottle, and what do I do with this beer bottle because I don’t want to get pulled over with it, or my buddies don’t want me drinking in the car with it, so that is usually where I find situations where it’s not convenient.”***

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## **A Confused Sense of What's Right**

*“When it comes to things like apples and stuff like that, I would be like, ‘If I just throw it on the ground the ants are going to eat it,’ or something. It’s not going to be wasted. At least an animal is going to eat it.”*



*“...those community clean-up days...are fun, so I shouldn’t really care about littering because somebody is going to feel good about spending their Saturday cleaning it up... I wouldn’t care about those people picking it up because I think they are doing something they enjoy doing.”*



*“I’m in a rush. I’m like, ‘My tax money has got to go for some purpose.’ I pay so many taxes someone can clean it up.”*

**Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative  
Opinion Research (Spring 2008)**

## **My Litter is Benign**

*“Yeah, I just set it down. I wouldn’t throw it, like trash the place. I set it down and forget something, I mean, I don’t intentionally forget it. Do you understand what I’m saying?”*

**Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative  
Opinion Research (Spring 2008)**

## **Broken Bottle on a Beach**

***“How many times are you going to get caught without your shoes?...”***

*MODERATOR: What’s that supposed to mean?*

***“How many times are you walking around barefoot?”***

*MODERATOR: This looks like this is the beach.*

***“I still wouldn’t be walking around barefooted on the beach.”***

*MODERATOR: But you guys chose this one as the most impacting, so I want to know why.*

***“I think it’s just like, damn, she is about to bust her foot on the glass.”***

*MODERATOR: Will it make you think about littering?*

***“No.”***

***“I think it’s because when you litter you don’t ever think of it as having that big of an impact.”***

***“Exactly.”***

***“To personally injure somebody.”***

***Additional Finding:***  
***Proximity makes it all real:***  
***It's the local stream, not the Bay.***  
***It's my own neighborhood,***  
***yard, or car.***  
***It's my own family's health.***

## Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

### 2007 Baltimore Stormwater Study

Baltimore's Inner Harbor is universally derided for its poor condition.

- Respondents complain about floating litter and oil.
- They discuss the smell.
- The litter barge is a widespread image.
- The Inner Harbor's trend is clearly "worse" as far as long-time residents are concerned.

*"The Inner Harbor is kind of the highlight of Baltimore but it's very embarrassing. ...I would not want to take my out-of-town friends to it."*

*"...There was an oily film on top. It looked almost toxic. There was an unpleasant odor. It was worse than I remember."*





**Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative  
Opinion Research (Spring 2008)**

## **Extreme Proximity**

### **Not in my yard:**

*MODERATOR: You don't like to litter where you live?*

*"...At my school, at work, anywhere but in front of my house, because I don't want people to come to my house and be like, 'This is a mess.' So I don't litter in front of my house. I try to not let the kids litter in front of there either."*

### **Not in my car:**

*"We probably would (still litter), because you know they have those bags for your car and I wouldn't want a trashcan in my car."*

*"I agree."*

*"I'd still just toss it out the window because of the smell and coffee."*

## Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

### *A Finding among the General Public in Baltimore*

Tying water quality to personal health is the most compelling approach.

- Contaminated drinking water, seafood, swimming are all motivating concerns.
- Keep in mind that perception is reality; even if drinking water may not be directly affected by runoff, consumers believe it might be.
- **The public wants to know how dirty water affects them personally.**  
We must speak to people's self interest.
- Altruistic appeals such as concern for the environment are far less motivating for average people.

## **Techniques:**

***Message must be believable,  
not exaggerated in their eyes.***

***Use few words.***

***Be concrete, straightforward.***

## Trash Free Potomac Watershed Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

### *Changing Impressions*

Why this ad works:

- Vulnerability of child
- Benign trash not so benign

**People who harm our  
communities often leave a trail.**



Use a garbage can for trash and recycle reusable materials. Never throw trash on the street or out your car window. To learn more ways to keep your neighborhood and waters healthy, clean and pollution free, visit [www.waterboards.ca.gov/education](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/education).

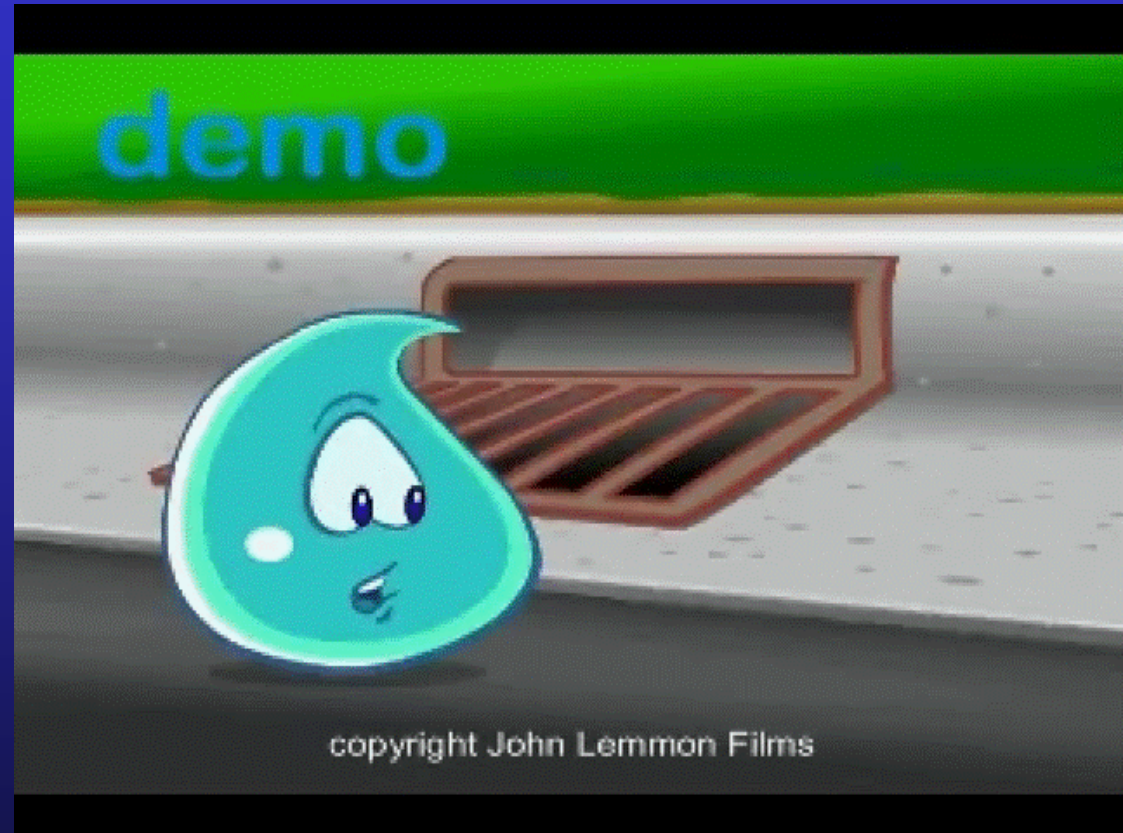
**Erase the  
Waste**  
Brought to you by  
the California Water Boards

# Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

## *Changing Impressions*

Why this ad works:

- Fun, not preachy
- Concrete
- “Makes our water sick.”
- Specific call to action:  
One item, not a laundry list.



## Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative Opinion Research (Spring 2008)

### *Changing Impressions*

#### Why this ad works:

- Direct
- Gets their attention
- Ties to core concerns
- Graphically simple
- Cute dog softens harsh message



**IF YOU THINK  
PICKING UP  
DOG POOP IS  
UNPLEASANT,  
TRY DRINKING IT.**

Pet waste washes into storm drains,  
polluting our rivers, lakes and drinking  
water sources. Get the scoop.

[www.Earth911.org](http://www.Earth911.org) | 1-877-EARTH911



# *Discussion*