

Demolition coming soon for first of Twelve Mile Creek dams

By Anna Mitchell

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CATEECHEE — Before the month is out, weather permitting, the first of three dams obstructing the flow of Twelve Mile Creek will start to come down.

Subcontractors for Schlumberger Technology Corp. worked Wednesday replacing an engine for a dredging machine used for removing tainted sediment from behind the Woodside I Dam in the Cateechee community minutes from Clemson in Pickens County.

Heavy machinery and tractor-trailers rolled back and forth all morning on Cateechee Trail, the community's main road, which ends at the river. Within the last week, workers have also started to build a retaining wall along the riverbed just above the dam.

"There's been more traffic on this road in the last six months than there has been in the last five years," said Dan Sanders, who bought the old Cateechee post office five years ago and is converting it into a home. "I think they are going to make it worse."

Schlumberger's goal with the dredging and removal of two dams, one at Cateechee and another less than half a mile downstream, is to restore Twelve Mile Creek to its original free-flowing state.

Dredge work near Woodside I is still under way but is almost done, said Stephen Harris, a spokesman for Schlumberger, in an e-mail.

The corporation was ordered to do the work because it owns a former capacitor manufacturing plant upstream in the city of Pickens that tainted the groundwater and nearby river with 37,700 cubic yards of polychlorinated biphenyls 40 years ago. It was declared a Superfund site in the mid-1980s.

PCBs seeped into a Seneca River tributary, and the carcinogenic toxin has been detected as far away as Hartwell Lake in Anderson. Signs warning visitors not to eat the fish have been posted at bridges and boat ramps throughout the watershed for more than 30 years.

Federal District Judge Ross Anderson has been overseeing the creek-restoration project, which pits Schlumberger against a consortium of trustees representing state and federal environmental and natural-resource agencies.

“My job is to see, by God, it’s fixed,” Anderson said. “Those of us who live here in Anderson think of the lake as something reverent. And we don’t like to see it fouled up.”

Once remediation of the original site, satellite dump sites and waterways is completed later this year, Anderson said, Schlumberger will likely have spent nearly \$100 million. Included in that figure is about \$9 million the state of South Carolina is devoting to the restoration of recreational fishing in the region.

The Twelve Mile Creek waterway has been choked by sediment that collected 20 feet up to the top of the Woodside I and Woodside II dams since they were built in the late 19th century. Below tons of sediment — tainted with PCBs — lies the original bedrock, also visible downstream of the dams as a series of whitewater rapids.

Tommy Campbell of Clemson owns 13 acres just above the Woodside II dam and said he’s hoping to develop his land once the dams are gone and the river restored.

“If you look at the geography of that dam, they built it basically into a gorge,” Campbell said. “That section right there in front of my property is going to be basically Class 3 rapids. It’s going to be extremely nice.”

Sanders said he doubted enough water would flow to allow kayaking but he said he had no problem with paddlers so long as they leave his property alone. The creek is visible from his house.

“I’ve got a clear shot from my kitchen window with a good rifle,” he said, laughing. “If they don’t bother me, I won’t bother them.”

Larry Dyck, a water biologist, said restoring the river benefits the environment in a number of ways. Fish will be able to live above and below the dams, and concentrated levels of PCBs are being removed through the dredging. Once the river is flowing, natural sediment will also flow downstream, covering PCBs that tend to collect at the bottom of waterways.

Dyck, representing several environmental groups, has also advocated removal of a third and final dam from Twelve Mile Creek — the Easley Central Water District dam about half a mile upstream of Woodside I. That would complete restoration of the river, he said.

Schlumberger was never ordered to remove that third dam as part of its settlement with the government, Anderson said, adding that he hopes federal funds might eventually cover the cost.

Part of the Schlumberger settlement is paying for a \$225,000 study of sediments above the Easley Central dam, but removing the dam would cost roughly another \$5 million. About \$2.5 million in Schlumberger settlement funds remains uncommitted and might pay for part of the dam removal, depending on the results of the sediment study.

That study is under way now, said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, a nonprofit group overseeing that project. A contract was signed with Kestral Engineering last week to do the work over the next couple of months, which includes testing the sediment for PCBs. Wyche said he is pursuing state and foundation grants to pay for removal of the dam.

“We haven’t totally given up,” he said.



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