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# More bacteria could be allowed in water



## Easley utility wants EPA to loosen fecal coliform rules

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**EASLEY** — A dispute over the amount of fecal coliform bacteria that can be released from a wastewater treatment plant into a Pickens County stream that flows into Lake Hartwell now rests with the Environmental Protection Agency.

The federal agency has until today to accept or deny a permit that relaxes state and federal limits on the amount of the bacteria found in human and animal waste that can be released into Golden Creek, a tributary of the Twelve Mile River that flows into Lake Hartwell, a source of recreation and drinking water for tens of thousands of Upstate residents.

EPA officials "have received several letters" about the permit "and are carefully reviewing them. A decision has not yet been made," said Davina Marraccini, an EPA spokeswoman.

The possibility of the pollution rules being relaxed is being opposed by groups and individuals concerned that it would set a precedent that could lead to degraded waters in South Carolina and throughout the nation.

Easley Combined Utilities, which operates the wastewater treatment plant on Golden Creek, contends that the relaxed standard is fair and something that's allowed elsewhere.

The state Department of Health and Environmental Control, which denied the utility's original request for a 10 percent variance in compliance and then was overruled by an administrative law judge, is "just leaving the

DWEN RILEY JR. / Staff

Easley Combined Utilities employee Warren Cox tests treated water flowing into Golden Creek at the Golden Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant.

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matter between the EPA and the utility," said Adam Myrick, a DHEC spokesman.

"We were asking for some relief from 100 percent," said Joel Ledbetter, manager of Easley Combined Utilities, which serves about 10,000 homes and businesses primarily in the city of Easley.

Administrative Law Judge Carolyn Matthews ruled that up to 10 percent of total samples over any 30-day period can exceed the permitted daily maximum for fecal coliform, according to court documents.

Matthews said in her ruling that the 10 percent provision is allowed in other places, including an Easley Combined Utilities' treatment plant on Georges Creek.

The occasional variance poses no threat to public health or safety, Ledbetter said.

Chris Starker, rural water project associate with Upstate Forever, which has asked the EPA to object to the permit, said the ruling sets a precedent that "makes it difficult for the public to protect waters."

The 10 percent provision means that "three days out of every month you don't know if the river is safe to swim in," Starker said.

"DHEC was required to make a revision to a permit that has the potential to jeopardize water quality," Starker said.

DHEC already shows the river impaired by fecal coliform contamination,



SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

Starker said.

"This is a step in the wrong direction," he said.

DHEC information shows the impairment is from what are called "non-point" sources, such as fertilizer runoff, rather than from any specific point such as discharge from the treatment plant, Ledbetter said.

The concentration of contaminants in wastewater can vary dramatically, making 100 percent compliance with fecal coliform standards impossible, Ledbetter said.

The Golden Creek plant has been out of compliance 1 percent of the time or less

over the past five years, Ledbetter said.

EPA guidelines can allow for a 10 percent exception, Ledbetter said.

Easley Combined Utilities was willing to compromise on a variance of less than 10 percent but DHEC didn't respond to the offer, Ledbetter said.

DHEC officials "did not feel that was in line with the regulations," Myrick said.

Easley Combined Utilities also is requesting the 10 percent provision in permit renewals recently submitted to DHEC for its other two wastewater treatment plants, Ledbetter said.