

Upstate mud filling Lake Greenwood

Study says two branches 60 percent filled

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GREENWOOD — Greenwood County's nickname is "South Carolina's Lakelands," but its biggest lake is slowly shrinking thanks to sediment pouring out of Greenville and Pickens counties, a new study shows.

Two branches of the lake fed by the Reedy and Saluda rivers are 60 percent filled, according to the study commissioned by the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium, a group led by Brad Wyche of Greenville. And the study didn't consider sections of the banks that may have already filled and

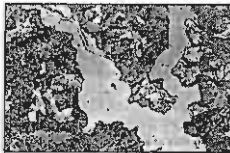
are now covered with vegetation, he said.

The sediment is alarming to Greenwood officials because the lake is the primary source of drinking water for the area. But there's no reason to panic, said Larry Smith, Greenwood County engineer.

"We'll be long dead before this is a problem that will affect drinking water," he said.

The new study isn't a revelation to people living along the northern stretches of the lake. Douglas Powers, who lives on a bank where the Reedy River empties

See LAKE on page 5A



Filling up: These aerial photos show the Reedy River branch of Lake Greenwood in 1954, top, and 1999.

LAKE

FROM PAGE 1A

into the lake, estimates the bottom of the river has come up 6 to 8 inches in the past 10 years.

Dennis DeFrancisco, a soil scientist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Greenville, said nearly everyone in the Upstate — and particularly developers — can do a lot more to control the erosion.

"We need more cooperation from developers in properly installing silt fences and quickly re-seeding soil areas," he said. "That's expensive, but it's more expensive to treat the problem down the road."

Farmers and homeowners can help by minimizing the amount of fertilizers and chemicals they use, he said. Local governments can enforce conservation and erosion regulations, he said.

"It's going to take a broad approach," he said. "There isn't one single entity that is causing this."

The lake is full now, thanks to weeks of rains.

Powers stood on his dock last week and looked out at herons wading through what looks like the center of the lake. To his right, the tops of a stand of grass waved above the water.

"It's not getting better," he said.

He might not be able to take his boat out whenever he wants, but on the bright side, the silt is very fertile, and that allows him to grow huge tomatoes without any fertilizer, Powers said, holding his fingers in a 5-inch circle.

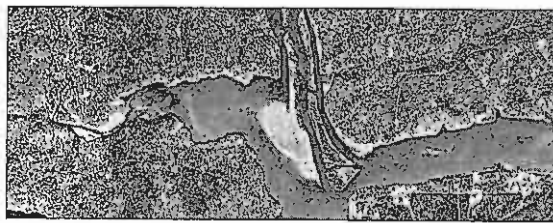
Reginald Hall, acting director of the USDA's Resource Conservation and Development office in Greenwood, said the biggest problem facing the lake is public awareness.

"If you don't go to the lake, don't boat and don't fish, you don't see why it's important," he said. "But if you bring up the fact that the lake is drinking water and bringing industry to the community, then they should care."

Asked why Greenville residents should care, Hall responded: "We're all downstream of somewhere."

Great impact

Smith said much of the sediment comes with storm water flowing downstream from Green-



Erosion: 1999 aerial view shows Saluda arm of Lake Greenwood.

ville. When the Upstate receives significant rain, it flows over pavement, through the stormwater system and into the Reedy or Saluda rivers. Development has created larger flash floods in the creeks and streams because the water doesn't have the wide-open spaces of trees and grass it had 20 or 30 years ago.

That high volume of water erodes the riverbanks north of the lake, Smith said.

Rivers carry dust, dirt and mud until the water slows, usually at its delta. In this case, the delta is Lake Greenwood.

Sediment, the researchers said, displaces water set aside for the residents of Greenwood. And shallow lake levels mean higher water temperatures, impacting fish populations and accelerating algae blooms and other ecological problems that Lake Greenwood has experienced in recent years.

"It all goes back to the old problem of nonpoint source pollution and the need to look at the entire watershed," Smith said.

In this case, "nonpoint source pollution" is from hundreds of rainstorms sweeping little amounts of dirt from hundreds of acres of land, DeFrancisco said.

"It's not a very sexy issue," he said. "It's not like a pipe is pumping toxic sewage into a river."

Aerial photos of the lake from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show dramatic changes between 1954 and 1999. When the water is even a few feet low, sand bars appear that, at the mouth of the Reedy River, look like a miniature version of the Mississippi River delta.

Brian Stoddard, the Greenwood conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, another USDA agency, said people think of erosion in terms of huge areas of land. He said this problem is probably the result of tiny amounts of erosion from a big area — which brings up concerns besides the silt.

"It's a matter of who knows what else," he said. "It might have to be cleaned up."

The study is part of a new research effort into the health of the Reedy and Saluda River watersheds — the land that feeds the rivers. The watershed covers roughly 1,165 square miles.

Lake Greenwood was created in 1941 and covers 11,400 acres of Greenwood, Laurens and Saluda counties.

Dumping ground

The study examined 7 percent of the total lake volume but showed more than 7.2 million cubic yards of sediment have filled the northern stretches of the lake, which is enough to load a million dump trucks or fill Ericsson Stadium in Charlotte

more than six times.

It's also the equivalent of 13.6 tons of sediment from every acre in the watershed, which stretches from Greenwood to northern Pickens and Greenville counties.

Kim Kroeger, the geologist who conducted the study, works with the Natural Resources Con-

servation Service in Raleigh. She said poor land-use practices north of the lake are to blame.

To see exactly how much sediment flows down the Reedy River, Greenville residents needed to look no further than the inch or so of mud and clay that coated Cleveland Park after a July 31 flash flood.

"All lakes will eventually fill in, but under natural conditions that normally takes centuries to occur," Kroeger said. "Land is being disturbed and altered, and it's obvious that huge volumes of soil have ended up in the lake."

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