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Upstate pollution travels downstream to visit lake

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Muck may return to Lake Greenwood

By Paul Alongi

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Whether you live in Travelers Rest or Fountain Inn, the chemicals you use to fertilize your lawn could find their way to the same place -- Lake Greenwood.

Nearly 1,200 square miles of the Upstate dump into the creeks and rivers that flow to the lake, a public source of drinking water about 50 miles south of Greenville. Researchers have linked all that runoff to an environmental hazard that could threaten fishing, boating and other water fun.

Algae blooms that can stink up the lake and kill fish could return if the herbicide the state is using to control the muck proves to be a short-term solution, said Jason Van Driesche, Upstate Forever's director of watershed conservation.

Cleaning the lake in the long term could mean more limitations on how close you can build homes or businesses to waterways and what chemicals you can use on your lawn. Farmers may need to change how they till the soil, and builders might need to do more to contain dirt on developing land.

"There is no cure-all for any of these activities because it's an inexact science," said Grant Cunningham, a Clemson University associate professor of planning and landscape architecture.

The rivers and creeks that flow into the 10,500-acre lake deliver a blast of phosphorous and nitrogen that algae blooms love. Researchers have linked several suspects to the chemical inflow, including a wastewater treatment plant, lawn run-off and septic tanks.

"It's like death by a thousand cuts," Van Driesche said.

Douglas Thomas of Laurens dipped his fishing line into the lake's brown water Tuesday, but he wasn't going to put any crappie or catfish on his plate, even if he caught one. He's heard too much about what flows into the lake.

"What can you do about it?" he asked. "You can't get the government to do anything anymore."

Greenville County Councilman Joe Dill said he is waiting to find out what is causing the algae build-up in Lake Greenwood. A Greenville environmental advocacy group, Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium, is studying the issue.

"You need to take whatever precautions to make sure it doesn't happen again," Dill said.

The algae was so thick in the summer of 1999, fishing and swimming were impossible where the Reedy River empties into the lake. If the algae had suddenly died, it could have sucked oxygen out of the water and killed fish.

A herbicide sprayed on the lake has tamed the algae since 2000.

Van Driesche fears the spray is a "Band-Aid" that fixes the problem only temporarily. The spray has been deemed safe to humans, although the state Department of Natural Resources has warned residents not to eat fish caught within three days after a spray.

The area that flows to the lake, the "Saluda-Reedy watershed," includes 1,500 miles of streams, seven counties and 15 municipalities, according to the Saluda-Reedy Water Consortium. It stretches 80 miles, from Greenville County's mountains to Lake Greenwood.

Stormwater and treated sewage from hundreds of thousands of homes make their way to the waterways, including the Reedy and Saluda rivers, according to the consortium. Development on the lake itself has exploded in recent years, becoming a prime spot for new homes.

Van Driesche, who also serves as a project coordinator for the consortium, said one of the more pressing issues is upstream sediment filling in the lake. A shallow, muddy lake would heat up faster, making it a prime breeding ground for algae blooms, he said.

Some of the sediment is natural, but Van Driesche said dirt from cleared lots washes into the water and has accelerated the fill-in.

Dick and Karen Inglese said they watch muddy clouds drift across the center of the lake and settle in front of their Stoney Point home after heavy rain.

"It's not a clean lake," Dick Inglese said. "It's not blue-green, so you really can't tell what's in it."

Anyone who has seen the banks of the Reedy River after a flood knows how much sediment the river can carry. A thick layer of muck covers the land around the river after the rushing, orange waters recede.

What might not be as evident is that the water can also wash lawn fertilizer to the lake where it can feed algae blooms, Van Driesche said.

The state doesn't have any warnings about drinking treated water out of Lake Greenwood, said Jan Easterling, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Environmental Control.

Tony Cooper, who lives in North Myrtle Beach but owns a home on Lake Greenwood, said he doesn't mind boating, skiing and riding a Jet Ski on the water, but that doesn't go for everyone in the family.

"My wife wouldn't get in the water for nothing," Cooper said.

## ON THE NET

+Researchers at the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium want to know how you feel about the water. To take their survey, go to [www.saludareedy.org](http://www.saludareedy.org)

Graphic: Staff map

Flowing downhill

Hundreds of rivers and streams from as far north as Greenville County's mountains carry sediment and chemicals 80 miles south to Lake Greenwood where some fear that algae blooms could return.

How you can help protect rivers, lakes and streams:

'Keep motor oil, pesticides and other toxic chemicals out of storm drains.

'Use only as much fertilizer as your lawn needs.

'Clean pet waste out of your yard.

'Let the trees, bushes and plants next to streams grow.

Saluda-Reedy Watershed

Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium

Outline: BART BOATWRIGHT/Staff

Fishing for fun, not food: Douglas Thomas says he enjoys fishing at Lake Greenwood but would not eat any fish that he caught there. Thomas is concerned about what flows into the lake.