



Posted on Tue, Apr. 07, 2009

Saluda River in peril, group declares

U.S. environmental organization rates S.C. river No. 6 on endangered list

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The Saluda River's high levels of phosphorus and sediment earned it a spot on a list of the country's most endangered rivers of 2009, marking the third time a South Carolina waterway has made the list in the past five years.

The environmental advocacy group American Rivers selects America's Most Endangered Rivers each year, focusing on problem waterways with potential for solutions in the near future. The Saluda is rated No. 6 on the 2009 list. The Catawba was No. 1 last year, and the Santee made the list at No. 6 in 2005.

The American Rivers report doesn't mention the pollution spill on the Saluda near Columbia last summer. Instead, the report deals almost exclusively with phosphorus discharges from wastewater plants and sediment runoff from development in the section of the river from the mountains through Lake Greenwood.

Permits for eight of the 12 wastewater treatment plants in that section of the river are up for renewal in the next two years.

"We have a unique opportunity to address the phosphorus problem," said John Tynan, a project manager for the advocacy group Upstate Forever.

A steep increase in phosphorus contributed to a massive algae bloom on Lake Greenwood in 1999. Since then, restrictions imposed on two wastewater plants on the Reedy River, which flows into the Saluda, have helped reduce the problem. But phosphorus-laden sediment is building up in the river and Lake Greenwood, according to the report.

River advocates say the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control should add more phosphorus restrictions on other plants on the Saluda during upcoming permit renewals.

"DHEC has been trying to address phosphorus and regulate phosphorus for a while," said Matt Rice of American Rivers' Columbia office. "They have been unsuccessful. It's complicated. It's expensive. But it's going to be more expensive if they don't address it and our rivers and lakes are no longer safe."

The state health agency has nutrient standards for lakes of more than 40 acres and for streams that are considered impaired. The agency is working on a more specific standard for all streams, but it could be several years before those changes are adopted into regulation, said David Baize, assistant chief of the Bureau of Water.

Wastewater plants use various processes to clean pollutants from sewage. Permits from DHEC spell out how clean the water leaving the plants has to be, including the level of phosphorus allowed.

The American Rivers report also notes high levels of sediment on the Saluda. Much of the blame is heaped on development of former timberland, which allows increasing soil erosion during rains.

The report calls for local governments to do a better job of regulating development, such as requiring more open space in subdivisions and wider vegetative buffers along streams.

The report deals with the Saluda above Lake Greenwood, but many of the same problems with wastewater treatment plants and development apply in Lake Murray and the section of the Saluda near Columbia, Rice said.

The problems on the other two South Carolina rivers that have made the endangered list recently revolved more around water quantity than quality. Interbasin transfers take water out of the Catawba in North Carolina, and not enough water flows out of Lake Moultrie into the Santee, according to those reports.

The reality is that all water quality problems are linked to water quantity problems, said Dan Tufford, a USC water resources professor. A healthy quantity of water flowing in a river helps dilute pollution.

Tufford thinks the reason South Carolina rivers regularly show up on the endangered list has to do with the lack of

state regulation on water use. Water management bills have bogged down in the state Legislature the past few years.

“South Carolina at a state policy level hasn’t come to grips with water allocation — how much water we have and how we manage it,” Tufford said.

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