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Saluda River one of nation's most endangered waterways, group claims

By Nan Lundeen
STAFF WRITER

An environmental group Tuesday named the Saluda River one of the nation's most endangered waterways, and a consortium that has studied the Saluda-Reedy watershed concluded in a report that the state must act now to set phosphorous limits along the Saluda to save Lake Greenwood and preserve the watershed.

Many Upstate communities, including Greenville, draw untreated water for drinking from the watershed, which serves more than 500,000 people in the Upstate, and the city of Greenwood relies on drinking water from Lake Greenwood.

American Rivers, which chose the Saluda from more than 100 nominees as one of America's 10 most endangered rivers, and the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium called on the state Department of Health and Environmental Control to establish more stringent limits on phosphorous concentrations from wastewater discharge.

DHEC has no statewide limits, "but from what we're seeing and hearing from the public, we are going to look more closely at this," DHEC spokesman Adam Myrick said.

He added DHEC could set numerical standards for phosphorous as a condition for the renewal of permits for wastewater treatment discharge. Eight permits soon are up for renewal on the Saluda and two on the Reedy River.

Ray Orvin, executive director of Renewable Water Resources, formerly Western Carolina Regional Sewer Authority, said, "From a practical point, we're very committed to working with all the parties to be good stewards of the waters of the Upstate."

Phosphorous is a nutrient that combined with other nutrients causes algae growth, lowers oxygen levels which can lead to fish kills, requires more chemical treatment of the water and can lower property values, said John Tynan, co-director of Upstate Forever's Clean Air and Water Program. Sediment from development also threatens the watershed, he said.

Technology has evolved making lower phosphorous discharges possible, said Dr. David Hargett, senior scholar at Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs.

But "very few people are implementing the very best technology because it's expensive," said Marshall Hyatt, environmental scientist for the federal Environmental Protection Agency. Statewide limits on phosphorous in wastewater discharges are uncommon, he said.

The technology needed to lower phosphorous limits would lead to a "substantial increase in rates," Orvin said.

Williamston Mayor Carthel Crout said Williamston plans to stop discharging wastewater effluent into the Saluda altogether and hopes to bring Pelzer and West Pelzer along. If funds are forthcoming, Williamston plans a \$14 million state-of-the-art land application of treated waste.

“We’re real proud that we have chosen to get out of the river,” Crout said.

In 1999, Lake Greenwood experienced an algae bloom that threatened the lake. In response, phosphorous limits were placed on wastewater discharges into the Reedy, which flows into the lake, Myrick said. He said algae hasn’t been noted as a problem in the part of the lake fed by the Saluda.
