

Saluda is No. 6

Greenville Journal

4/10/09

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Phosphorus and sediment threaten to undo 30 years of progress on water quality in the Saluda River basin, said environmental groups and federal officials at a news conference to announce the Saluda is ranked 6th on American Rivers list of the top 10 endangered streams in the nation.

The Saluda is the third South Carolina stream to make the river advocacy group's list in the past four years. Last year the Catawba River topped the national listing and the Santee was ranked 6th in 2005.

Speaking at the plush RiverHouse at the Acadia development along the banks of the Saluda River outside of Greenville, Matt Rice, state representative of American Rivers said the Saluda basin faces the threat of phosphate pollution from eight sewage treatment plants on the river itself and from two plants on the Reedy River.

A troika of environmental groups urged the state Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) to impose meaningful restrictions on phosphate discharges from sewage treatment plants.

The 10 plants are all up for DHEC license renewal over the course of the next 18 months, a fact that John Tynan, co-director of Upstate Forever's Clean Air and Water Program, called crucial to ensuring the river and Lake Greenwood's health.

In response to questions from the Journal, the agency said, "Currently, SCDHEC has narrative standards that protect rivers from excessive nutrient loading (that would include phosphates). SCDHEC has a goal of developing a numeric phosphorus standard for freshwater streams and rivers; however, a standard for this criterion may not be adopted into regulation for several years."

Craig Hesterlee, South Carolina Watershed coordinator with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said the data on the Saluda basin shows the lake and the river don't have years.

He talked about the Saluda basin reaching a tipping point in development that he's seen run its course in Atlanta.

"When you hit that 10 percent paving cover figure, things start going downhill fast," he said.

"I used to tell my kids that the time to start swimming wasn't when you hit bottom," said Dave Hargett, a research partner in the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium.

George Fletcher, a member of the Renewable Water Resources Board, said the sewage treatment agency has found that using biological treatments for phosphates

at their Mauldin Road plant is cost effective.

He also said the small size of Upstate rivers requires sewage treatment facilities treat water to a higher standard.

Hargett said new technology enables wastewater treatment to standards that were not possible a few years ago.

"We don't want to put people (sewage treatment facilities) out of business," he said. "We do want to see them use the best technology that's available."

The plants in question, coupled with sediment loads from construction in the heavily developed Upstate are forcing up phosphate levels in the river and in Lake Greenwood. Phosphates cling to the sediments and there is a considerable load of contamination already in the riverine system headed for the lake.

DHEC's statement said the Reedy River arm of Lake Greenwood

has been impaired for phosphates since 1998, but maintains the Saluda River arm is not impaired. In 1999 Lake Greenwood suffered from major algae blooms that killed fish and choked the Reedy River arm of the lake.

The Saluda provides drinking water for 500,000 people and recreation for countless thousands more at the river's two major lakes, Greenwood and Murray, and along the 1,400 miles of streams that make up the basin. The cost of degraded water quality in Lake Greenwood alone can be measured in tens of millions of dollars in real estate and recreation value, environmentalists say.

"While Lake Greenwood has not had algae blooms every year and the problems have not been so acute in the Saluda arm that is partly because Greenwood County has been routinely applying herbicides to control both algae and aquatic weeds,

which flourish in the presence of nutrient enriched waters," said Hargett, who has done extensive research on water quality issues in the basin.

He cited recent work by the state Department of Natural Resources

that indicates during drought periods, when Lake Greenwood is vulnerable, 50 to 70 percent of the phosphates in the rivers comes from a handful of point sources. These sewage treatment plants are obviously the "low hanging opportunity" to reduce phosphate loads.

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DAVE HARGETT ON THE NEED TO CUT POLLUTION IN THE SALUDA RIVER