



Water-Quality Woes Persist Untreated Sewage, Phosphorous Among Concerns

by : Corey Hutchins

More than half a year after the Saluda River landed on a national list of the top 10 most endangered rivers for 2009, water quality in the Midlands is still a sludgy subject.

Recently, questions have emerged about the amount of wastewater entering nearby rivers and whether facilities that treat the waste are doing everything they can to ensure their plants aren't further contaminating local waterways.

The local outlook isn't shimmering.

Just last week, the Central Midlands Council of Governments said that a 20-year plan to get rid of pollution discharges in the lower Saluda River has run into snags and may wind up more difficult to complete than expected.

Also, several small wastewater plants in the area have come under fire by environmental groups as phosphorous pollution increasingly emerges as a major player in the contamination conversation.

Lawmakers are taking note.

"Wastewater treatment plants, through overflow of untreated sewage and accidental release of untreated [waste], creates a major problem," says Rep. Mike Pitts, a Laurens County Republican. "A lot of them [have] no limits on phosphorous levels."



An aerial view of emissions from the Columbia Metro Wastewater Treatment Plant near 1-77 into the Congaree River. *Courtesy photo*

Phosphorous pollution is perhaps a lesser-known problem facing many South Carolina waterways — mercury and fecal coliform tend to make more headlines — but its presence in rivers and lakes does serious damage.

Often formed by the improper use of fertilizers or as a product of construction runoff, phosphorous is a nutrient essential to plant growth that can cause rapid spawns of algae blooms. Those blooms end up choking oxygen off from other aquatic life, creating an unsustainable imbalance in the water.

Local flyfishing guide Michael Frank of Frank's Fly Arts says a handful of pipes from sewage plants along the Columbia rivers he fishes often emit smells that can be unpleasant to clients.

"I think that we have to accept that the rivers in Columbia are urban, and much of the pollution comes from industries that have been granted the right to discharge their wastewater into them," Frank says. "We should, however, be able to expect that our regulatory agencies are going to enforce the limits placed on these industries and inspect their facilities on a regular basis."

Columbia has indeed had its fair share of wastewater problems.

Much of the concern centers on toxic spills from waste treatment plants nearby that have malfunctioned and gushed millions of gallons of harmful waste directly into surrounding rivers. Earlier this year, a City of Columbia pipe spilled raw sewage into the Broad River for nearly eight hours. Last summer, an Alpine Utilities sewer plant in Lexington blew a gasket and wastewater glogged into the Saluda, spiking sickening bacteria counts to unsafe levels. Alpine paid a \$25,000 fine for the mishap.

It happens more often than we'd like to believe, says Congaree Riverkeeper Alan Mehrzad. Mehrzad took on the river keeper job at the beginning of this year and says he's asked the state Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) for all of their discharge monitoring reports to find out just how often local facilities are doing it.

The reports are given monthly to DHEC and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by local waste treatment plants.

When you look at the data in the reports for the Columbia area, "it just scares the bloody hell out of you," says Chris Christner, a member of the Sierra Club of South Carolina Water Committee.

Last year, the Columbia Metro Waste Water Treatment Plant, which operates near I-77 on the banks of the Congaree River, reported more than a dozen unpermitted discharges, according to its filings with DHEC. In December 2008, EPA and DHEC officials raided the plant and served criminal search warrants that alleged false record-keeping and pollution issues.

City of Columbia director of Utilities and Engineering John Dooley says the reported discharges don't apply specifically to the plant, but also to other parts of the sewage collection system off-site.

"We have not had any upsets at the plant or any discharges of untreated wastewater from the plant," he says, adding that they have not reported any recent violations and are not dumping any untreated waste into the Congaree River.

The plant's permit is up for renewal, and Dooley says they are anticipating a \$40 million upgrade to the facility. The plant is permitted to release 60 million gallons of treated wastewater per day.

Currently the plant has five sludge digesters on site, Dooley says, but only three of them are in service. He says the plant had a "chlorine problem" about 18 months ago, but hasn't had any recent leaks.

One way to combat the issue of wastewater pollution in the state's waterways is better enforcement of existing regulations, says Rep. Pitts, who is also advising a community-based steering committee along with the conservation group Upstate Forever.

The group aims to strengthen permit limits for phosphorus and apply pressure to DHEC to do so.

"A lot of things are already in place through the EPA and the Clean Water Act and other things," Pitts says. "They just need to be better enforced."

Citizen activism is also encouraged. DHEC spokesman Adam Myrick says if anyone in the community notices something suspicious in the rivers or near treatment facilities they should contact the agency.

People can also report possible violations, spills, and other concerns via the EPA web site, says Dawn Harris-Young, a spokeswoman for the agency's Region 4 office in Atlanta.

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