

Published: Oct 02, 2007 12:30 AM

Modified: Oct 02, 2007 05:05 AM

[More Photos](#)

Raleigh wants cleanup waiver

Faces \$80 million bill in sewage mess

WADE RAWLINS, Staff Writer

Pollution from treated sewage would leak for decades into the Neuse River under a plan the city of Raleigh wants the state to approve.

Raleigh officials are asking for a waiver from state rules that would require an \$80 million cleanup of widespread groundwater contamination around its Neuse River sewage-treatment plant. The city argues essentially that time and nature will eventually scrub the fields and groundwater of pollutants.

For years, workers at the plant spread too much treated waste sludge on farm fields around the plant, despite warnings from the state. The city was eventually fined and ordered to develop a cleanup plan. Now, the groundwater beneath more than 1,100 acres of fields is contaminated with high levels of nitrates, which can harm humans and trigger fish kills downstream near the coast.

Since the problem came to a head in 2002, the state suspended the city's permit to spread more sludge on the fields. The city has spent more than \$40 million improving the operation of the plant and has turned a higher proportion of the plant's sludge into fertilizer and compost. Some treated waste is trucked to Duplin and Sampson counties and spread on farms there.

But city officials say ringing the entire site in southeastern Wake County with hundreds of wells to collect and treat the groundwater would cause a financial hardship, costing nearly \$80 million.

Instead, city leaders propose to spend about \$8 million to build 40 recovery wells. That would clean up 20 acres nearest housing subdivisions close to the plant.

The city wants natural degradation to gradually clean up the areas where monitoring wells show the highest concentrations of nitrogen -- amounts up to 18 times the maximum allowed under state law. Some of those fields border the Neuse River.

City officials say the approach poses no risk to public health because nearby residents have been hooked to municipal water and the contamination will be monitored. High levels of nitrates in drinking water can be toxic to infants, who have undeveloped digestive systems that can't break down the pollutants. As a result, oxygen levels fall in the blood, leading to a condition known as blue baby syndrome.

"There is no public health impact for spending tens of millions of dollars on a remediation system," said Steve Levitas, a lawyer representing the city.

But some residents near the spray fields say the city is skirting state environmental standards.

"They were issued a permit, and along with that permit came a lot of rules and regulations about how they should conduct their business," said Phillip Douglas, a retired electronics engineer who lives near the plant. "One of the rules prohibits natural attenuation, which means letting nature clean up your mess. When they messed up and found out how much money it's going to cost to clean it up, they want a variance."

Douglas, who opposes the city's plan, said state regulators should be the guardians of the state's water quality and should not take cost into account.

The state Division of Water Quality is taking public comments through Oct. 5 on the city's request for the waiver from state rules. The state Environmental Management Commission, a 19-member panel appointed by the governor and legislative leaders, is expected to hear Raleigh's request in November.

City's rationale

Raleigh contends its plan would keep it below its limit for nitrogen discharge into the river. It has sharply reduced its nitrogen discharges in the past decade, so it has unused discharge capacity. Jay Zimmerman, regional supervisor for the state's aquifer protection section, said the city's approach has technical merit because of the practical complications of trying to remove groundwater from the overall site.

"The way I have explained it is if they were discharging 500,000 pounds of nitrogen into the river, whether or not it was the right thing for the river, they would be in compliance with their permit," Zimmerman said. "We're not saying it's the best choice."

He said the city had not considered another alternative -- to clean up the most contaminated areas in addition to the areas near subdivisions.

Dean Naujoks, the Upper Neuse Riverkeeper, an environmental advocate, said state environmental regulators should not give the city a waiver because the pollution will harm the river.

"Raleigh's groundwater pollution contributes more nitrogen per year to the Neuse River than the towns of Apex, Benson, Butner, Cary, Clayton, Wake Forest and Zebulon combined," Naujoks said, noting that Johnston County could be added in, too, and Raleigh would still be the leading nitrogen polluter. "The bottom line is they should be required to offset their nitrogen pollution that is entering the river from contaminated groundwater."

In addition to being harmful to infants, nitrogen causes excessive algae growth, which can rob the water of oxygen as it dies and cause fish kills, hampering sport and commercial fishing. The Neuse has shown stress downstream from too much nitrogen-rich treated sewage and fertilizer runoff from farms.

Since massive fish kills in the 1990s, which led to the Neuse's being classified as sensitive to nitrogen, state environmental officials have tried to reduce the amount of nitrogen entering the river from sewage-treatment plants and farming by 30 percent. The city of Raleigh has sharply reduced its nitrogen discharge into the river.

"We don't like to have any more nitrogen in the Neuse than we can help," said Walter B. Hartman Jr., city manager of New Bern, which is near the stretch of the river where fish kills have historically occurred. "We're not throwing stones. We just need to take a close look at it -- make sure there is not a better way."

wade.rawlins@newsobserver.com or (919) 829-4528

Get it all with convenient home delivery of **The News & Observer**.

HOW TO COMMENT

The state Division of Water Quality is accepting public comments on Raleigh's variance request through Friday. The case is scheduled to go before the state Environmental Management Commission in November. Written comments should be directed to:

David Hance

DENR-DWQ-Planning Section

1617 Mail Service Center

Raleigh, NC 27699-1617

Fax number: (919) 715-5637

E-mail address: David.Hance@ncmail.net

Related Content

- [Nitrate contamination](#)

© Copyright 2009, The News & Observer Publishing Company

A subsidiary of [The McClatchy Company](#)