

## Bluffton officials say residents have to help protect May River

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Bluffton officials say they are striving to restore water quality in the May River, but some people concerned about the river worry the town is not doing enough.

Town officials spoke at length about the issue Monday after announcing last week that increased levels of fecal coliform would close more of the once-pristine river to shellfishing this season, which runs from September to May.

They said they are pursuing a variety of strategies to combat the pollutant's suspected sources, which include pet waste, septic tanks, wildlife, ineffective stormwater retention ponds and increasing development.

They can't say for sure their actions will be enough, but they think small steps will add up to a significant impact.

"You're looking for a cumulative effect," town natural resources manager Kimberly Jones said. "It's going to have to be bits and pieces here and there."

Studies have attributed high fecal coliform levels in local waterways largely to increased development in the area.

Jones said it's possible for the town to continue growing while minimizing harm to the river. The latest shellfishing restrictions, however, indicate the town hasn't achieved that goal with previous development, she said.

"The way we have been doing it, in retrospect, doesn't seem to be the right way," she said.

Until 2009, shellfish could be harvested throughout the river.

Last season, shellfish harvesting was closed on two miles of the river and only conditionally approved for a handful of days on another four miles.

This season, that four-mile stretch -- about a third of the territory fished by the Bluffton Oyster Co. -- will be closed, too.

To change that, town officials are working on a May River Watershed Action Plan intended to restore shellfish harvesting to all of the river.

As part of the plan, the town is among several parties that received a federal grant to reduce fecal coliform levels in the river. The grant and matching funds amount to \$1 million. The grant will help pay to revise the town's stormwater ordinance; overhaul its code to address land use and zoning in the watershed; and increase programs to install rain barrels and gardens and inspect, clean and replace septic systems.

Such measures are small comfort for David Kendrick, who lives about 150 yards from the river, near Verdier Cove. He said coves that once rose and fell with the tide have turned into creeks that flow constantly with runoff from nearby development, and he thinks the town has not responded quickly enough to residents' concerns about the river.

"Everything that's been said for the last four or five years has just fallen on deaf ears," said Kendrick, who has lived in the area since 1986. "You can either get busy fixing the problem, or you can continually do studies."

He's not an engineer, he said, but he thinks elected officials who pledged to protect the river need to figure out how to do so.

"Unfortunately, that's a solution for them to come up with," Kendrick said. Nancy Schilling, founding director of the nonprofit group Friends of the Rivers, thinks the trend of shellfish closures can be reversed, although she questions whether town officials have the will to do it.

There is sufficient science and knowledge to make a difference, she said.

"I don't know why anyone's holding back on moving it ahead," Schilling said.

She has resigned from some efforts to help the river out of frustration with town officials, she said.

Town officials say they need residents to help them by doing things such as picking up pet waste and examining septic systems.

"The town can't do this by itself," Jones said. "It has to be the greater Bluffton area that participates willingly."