

Managing wildlife next for town's May River cleanup projects

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Deer, raccoons, coyotes and even birds roosting on docks might be contributing to high fecal coliform levels in the May River, and Bluffton officials say addressing wildlife waste is next on a list of river cleanup projects.

The May River Action Plan, currently under review, recommends a yearlong survey be conducted to find out whether numbers or concentrations of wild animals have increased near local waterways because of development encroaching on their habitats.

The results of the survey could lead to reducing the animal population through hunting or birth control, according to the plan.

The town also hopes to change bird behavior. Bird roosting deterrents that look like whirligigs will pop up this fall on docks and boathouses, according to town natural resources manager Kim Jones.

"The intent is to reduce the number of shore and wading birds roosting and defecating over the water by forcing them to roost on land," Jones said in an e-mail. "By defecating over land, there is at least an opportunity for the feces to be treated prior to entering the river."

Details of how many deterrents would be placed, where they would go and the cost of the program have not been finalized, Jones said. It would follow other projects the town has started with a \$1 million grant from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, including free septic tank repairs and a campaign to urge residents to clean up after their pets.

Jay Cantrell, wildlife biologist with the state Department of Natural Resources' Webb Wildlife Center, said there are ways to gauge animal impact.

Surveyors could perform spotlight surveys at night to see how many eyes are reflected. Game cameras could be installed in wetlands to count the number of animals that pass by, and with deer, surveyors can count tracks or check if areas have been cleared of vegetation.

Cantrell, however, doesn't believe local wildlife, even concentrated in small areas, are contributing to fecal coliform levels that have shut down shellfish harvesting along a four-mile stretch of the May River. Fecal coliform is a bacteria in human and animal waste and is a sign of pollution.

"It'd be a stretch for me to believe any wildlife is contributing to pollution," Cantrell said.

The May River Action Plan has been criticized by town committees and a coastal-development expert for focusing on restoration instead of dealing with controlling the future development they see as the main culprit.

Jones, however, says the town is examining all possible ways to cut pollution, and reducing animal waste is part of that.