

Town launches May River 'social marketing'

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By [Frank Morris](#)

Anti-pollution campaign aims to get people to clean up after dogs.

“Neighbors for Clean Water,” an environmental awareness initiative designed for the May River cleanup campaign, was launched Monday by the town of Bluffton with a slogan of “Our Rivers, Our Responsibility.”

The “social marketing campaign” will “focus on local outreach to reduce pet waste and leaky septic systems, two sources of fecal coliform bacteria in the May River,” organizers said.

Highlights include a “scoop the poop” pledge drive for dog owners. Those who live in the May River watershed and make the pledge “to always pick up after my dog” will become contestants in a lottery for award and installation of pet-waste septic systems for their yards.

The focus is on owners of properties that drain into the May River.

High fecal coliform levels resulted in state health officials closing headwaters areas to shellfish harvesting in the past two seasons, and the closures are expected to continue next season.

The initiative is part of the much broader May River Watershed Action Plan developed by town officials with Beaufort County support. Its goal is to restore unhealthy sections of the May River, reopen closed beds and then keep the river pristine.

Beaufort County officials are partnering in the campaign, which covers the entire May River watershed inside and outside town limits, said Kim Jones, town natural resources manager.

The project is being implemented with support from a U.S. EPA Section 319 grant of \$483,500 through the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control. The town’s share, a 40 percent match, brings the total to \$805,994.

Out of that, the total budget allocated for the social marketing project is \$40,000. Water Words that Work LLC, of Falls Church, Va., a consultant hired by the town for \$35,635, developed the social marketing campaign. That leaves up to \$4,365 for production of collateral materials and advertising, Jones said.

“Over the next few months, we will carry out a pair of initiatives to encourage and help residents do their part to clean up the May River,” she said. “We’ll focus on simple habits that add up to make a big difference.”

Organizers said in the release that “although the May River is still one of South Carolina’s cleanest, the river is plagued with high levels of fecal coliform bacteria that, on occasion, exceed federal health standards for eating oysters. The problem has many causes. The Neighbors for Clean Water initiative will target two of these causes — pet waste and poorly maintained septic systems.”

In a news conference call Monday, Water Words that Work owner Eric Eckl talked about the program and how it will center on a website.

“We’re going to be working on the next several months on two initiatives, and the hub is going to be the website, he said of www.neighborsforcleanwater.org

“The first initiative is we’re going to be encouraging residents to scoop their dogs’ poop and put it in the trash in public areas and on private property. Then a little later we are going to encourage folks who have septic systems to have those systems inspected and repaired, and we have some financial assistance available,” he said. “Both of these are sources of fecal coliform in the river, so that’s what we’re focusing on here with Neighbors for Clean Water.”

The initiative will challenge and encourage residents whose property drains to the May River to reduce their ‘unscooped’ pet waste through a ‘Scoop the Poop’ pledge drive. Residents who take online “Scoop the Poop” pledge the pledge before Sept. 9 will be entered into a drawing to for award an installation of a “Doggie Dooley” pet septic system, valued at more than \$100, in their yards. There will be five winners.

The Town will promote the pledge and drawing with mailings, advertisements and public service announcements.

In developing the campaign, organizers worked with a focus group and the town conducted an informal, online survey of residents in the watershed area.

It found, based on 151 responses:

- 77 percent agree that “responsible neighbors pick up after their pet in public areas”
- 71 percent agree that “responsible neighbors pick up after their pet on private property”
- 57 percent agree that, “I am aware of which neighbors leave pet waste in public areas”
- 62 percent agree that “I am aware of which neighbors leave pet waste in their yards.”

Jones said, “Overwhelmingly, residents handle their pet waste responsibly and want their neighbors to, also. And if you’re one of those few who aren’t scooping your dogs’ poop, your neighbors know who you are.”

While no estimates are available on how many dog owners don’t pick up after their pets, several studies have found 40 percent of Americans don’t pick up their dogs’ feces, according to a report cited by Jones.

To get the message out, the marketing plan includes using targeted online advertising on Facebook to dog owners within a 10-mile radius of the town, Eckl said.

The campaign also will include:

- Emails to homeowners associations, to those who took the surveys, and to those who take the pledge
- Postcards to area dog owners
- News coverage and public service announcements “touting progress and encouraging participation”
- Other advertising in a bimonthly newspaper and through Google’s broker network.

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ON THE NET

Learn more about the social marketing campaign for May River protection online at www.neighborsforcleanwater.org