

Bacteria levels slide in May River

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While bacteria levels in deeper portions of the May River seem to be improving, local officials say that's not the case in some of the shallow tidal creeks.

Mike Monday, shellfish manager with the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, presented new water quality data Wednesday to the May River Waterbody Management Plan Implementation Committee.

The state samples collected in the middle of the river showed fecal coliform -- bacteria from human and animal waste -- has been above acceptable levels since January.

In March, the levels spiked to more than five times what state and federal standards allow.

In April, May, June and July, the counts returned to levels deemed safe for shellfish consumption, Monday said. Officials could offer no reason for the improvement, and Monday said it's too early to tell if shellfish grounds can reopen next year. Four miles of the river are closed to shellfishing.

Local water quality sampling, however, continues to show high fecal counts in the small upland creeks that flow into the river, said Kim Jones, Bluffton's natural resources manager.

Town samples collected from February through July show bacteria levels are between 25 and 50 times higher than the standard, especially along May River Road, in Palmetto Bluff and in Rose Dhu Creek Plantation.

Officials say the difference between the state and local samples could be that the pollution has been diluted by the time it gets to the deeper river. Sampling from the middle of the river would show less fecal coliform than those from a small tidal creek, said Alan Warren of the University of South Carolina Beaufort.

Larry Toomer, owner of the Bluffton Oyster Co., asked what happened in the last four months that allowed parts of the river to return to healthier conditions.

"I'm just saying, we had a problem we were dealing with for months and then something drastic happened," Toomer said, referring to a campground whose septic tank overflowed in April. DHEC, which had been investigating the site since January, ordered property managers to clean it up. The tanks were pumped and a new drain field was installed.

State and local officials continue to inspect the site and say they have not found evidence pointing to the campground as the source of pollution in the river. The committee is looking at freshwater runoff as one of the primary pollution sources.

To better understand sampling data, the committee unanimously agreed to ask the Bluffton Town Council to purchase and install tidal gauges to monitor the flow of water and its quality. The project would cost the town about \$81,936. The issue now moves to town council.