

May River water quality shows some improvement

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While recent state data have shown water quality in the May River is improving, it's too early to tell if the entire waterway will be open to shellfish harvesting next season.

In April, May, June, July and August, fecal coliform counts --pollutants caused by human and animal waste -- returned to levels deemed safe for shellfish consumption, according to S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control data. That change was somewhat unexpected. Bluffton experienced heavy rains during that period, which usually leads to higher counts, said DHEC spokesman Thom Berry.

So far, September's counts have been slightly above acceptable levels, according to the data. Officials offered no explanation for the five-month improvement or the small increase this month.

The improving outlook is good news for locals who make their living on the river like Larry and Tina Toomer of the Bluffton Oyster Co. "We're not dead yet," Larry Toomer said. "The oysters look good. (The season) always starts off slow but we are harvesting." The season runs September to May.

Toomer said he's harvesting the river with the exception of the headwaters, which DHEC has classified as a "restricted area" this season. That means water quality there does not meet state and federal standards, making oysters growing there unsafe to eat.

Because heavy downpours Friday dropped nearly eight inches of rain on parts of Bluffton, DHEC closed shell fishing throughout the river as a precautionary measure, a standard practice.

"If we get over 4 inches of rain within a 24-hour period, then, for precautionary reasons, they shut (shellfish beds) down until they can test them," Tina Toomer said.

She said those tests are scheduled this week. The beds will reopen once test results show the water meets quality standards.

Before Friday's rains, the river was approved for harvesting in most areas.

From just below Rose Dhu Creek to Crane Island -- about four miles downstream of the headwaters-- DHEC classified the river as "conditionally approved." That means shellfish beds are closed only when it rains more than 1.1 inches.

DHEC announced those changes in the river's classification in May, based on three years of water quality monitoring that showed rising levels of fecal coliform.

Monthly tests earlier this year that showed fecal coliform counts spiked to more than five times what state and federal standards allow.

TAKING THE LONG VIEW

Larry Toomer believes the improvement is due to one thing.

"Nothing physically changed in the river since April with the exception of what was going on at the campground," he said, referring to Stoney Crest Plantation Campground whose septic tank overflowed April 15.

DHEC ordered property managers to clean it up. The tanks were pumped and a new drain field was installed. There have been no problems there since.

While the overall numbers are improving, Larry Toomer doesn't want people to lessen efforts to reduce pet waste, stormwater runoff and other contaminants.

Berry said DHEC evaluates the health of shellfish beds every January by averaging the samples collected over three years. It's too early to tell if the recent improvements are enough to change the river's classification for the next harvest, Berry said.

"We look at the numbers really more from an annual basis rather than month to month," he said. "Whatever we see in a sample ...is only a snapshot at that moment in time at that specific location. So while we may be seeing numbers that may show either an improvement or a worsening of water quality, we really have three more months of data to collect before we can say one way or another whether things are getting better or worse."