

We say ... There's hope for the May

Sunday May 17, 2009

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Regret won't restore our oyster beds. We need innovative thinking, a clear strategy and political courage.

The May River is "impaired." The state recently designated about four miles of oyster beds as "conditionally approved." That means the beds must be closed for two weeks after a heavy rain because of the risk of fecal coliform contamination.

This revelation has spawned a measure of "I-told-you-so" finger-pointing, blame-gaming hysteria — none of which is going to make May River oysters any more edible after a thunderstorm.

Perhaps it was just inevitable, as night follows day, from the moment the first "lagoon" was dug at Sea Pines. But the restriction on one of the two most pristine rivers in South Carolina has been a call to action, the catalyst for the May River War Plan to reduce pollution.

The war plan took a radical turn Thursday as members of the May River Water-body Management Committee decided to not only prevent future pollution but to restore water quality.

"We're in uncharted territory here," said Chris Marsh, a committee member and director of the Lowcountry Institute. "No one has ever developed next to coastal waters and maintained high-level shellfish waters."

To focus on the positive, the war plan panel is headed in the right direction:

It started with science, forming a technical advisory committee to render objective analysis and recommendations;

It has focused on a specific problem — total volume of runoff, regardless of the source;

It has made a strong opening gambit in proposing an ordinance to not just contain future stormwater but to retroactively curtail existing runoff;

It has united efforts across jurisdictions, enlisting municipal, county, state and federal agencies.

There's no guarantee of success. This has never been done before. Perhaps it can't be done here, or anywhere. But as Town Manager Bill Workman has said: "It won't be because we didn't try."