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We say ...Okatie report aims at fixing water quality

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We got a sneak preview of the state's official assessment of Okatie River water quality Tuesday. Department of Health and Environmental Control officials say it's the first step in a plan to reduce fecal coliform pollution and, eventually, restoration of shellfish areas.

We're all for that. But, like some other skeptics in the audience, we fear it's too little too late for the Okatie River. Since 1995 the Okatie has been classified by DHEC as "impaired" under the standards of the federal Clean Water Act. Since then it has been closed to shellfish harvesting.

That was 15 years ago and there has been alot of water through the watershed, if you'll pardon the metaphor. Since then new development and population growth have further exacerbated pollution in the Okatie River. The town of Bluffton is considering another annexation near the Okatie that would enable still more development.

And the threat of even more potential pollution lurks in the yet-unrealized plans for a mega-mall near the Okatie headwaters.

The new study establishes a total maximum daily load (TMDL), which is the "amount of pollution that can enter a waterbody and still meet water quality standards," according to Mihir Mehta of the DHEC Bureau of Water.

Fecal coliform pollution needs to be reduced by 51 percent in the Okatie headwaters to meet shellfish harvesting water quality standards, he said. That's alot of improvement in the existing situation, without consideration of any future sources of pollution washed into the Okatie by stormwater runoff.

DHEC bills the TMDL document as a tool that will jump start efforts to rehabilitate the Okatie River through planning, local government cooperation and better stormwater management practices.

We urge local officials and citizens to join the cause, because we haven't given up hope for one of our prized waterways. It can't hurt to try.