

#8 NEUSE RIVER

THREAT: POORLY PLANNED DEVELOPMENT

SUMMARY

It would be hard to match the damage done to the waters of the Neuse River by massive hog operations in the watershed, but if developers get their way, human sewage, stormwater runoff and habitat destruction could earn that dubious distinction. With sprawling coastal development creeping inland, and urban growth in the headwaters, the Neuse is the new frontier for poorly planned development. The North Carolina Division of Water Quality (NCDWQ) must tackle the issue; otherwise human sewage, polluted runoff and other municipal pollution will soon present a problem as serious as runoff from factory hog operations.

THE RIVER

Beginning near Durham, the Neuse River flows through Raleigh and empties into Pamlico Sound. Despite suffering from decades of pollution, many endangered species including the Carolina madtom (a freshwater catfish), Tar River spiny mussel, piping plover, dwarf wedge mussel and loggerhead turtle remain in the Neuse River basin. Dolphins and alligators are seen regularly in the estuary, and sharks and manatees occasionally appear as far upriver as New Bern.

The Neuse, whose name is derived from the Neusiok — a Native American tribe that inhabited the New Bern area — has a rich history of human interaction. With more than 3,400 miles of tributaries, the river flows 250 miles from the Piedmont to Pamlico Sound. Approximately 2 million people, one-sixth of

the state's population, reside in the basin. The river, via Falls Lake, provides drinking water to 400,000 Raleigh-area residents and its estuary serves as a primary nursery for commercially and recreationally important fish and shellfish. Water sports such as kayaking and sailing as well as other forms of tourism are important economic drivers for the region.

THE THREAT

For many years, nutrient-laden waste from millions of hogs living in concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) in the state's Coastal Plain has overloaded the entire Neuse basin with nitrogen, phosphorus and ammonia. Excessive amounts of these nutrients feed explosive algal growth, which depletes oxygen in the water and has caused some of the largest fish kills in the nation. Nutrients from hogs and other sources have also led to outbreaks of Pfiesteria, a tiny one-celled organism that produces a neurotoxin deadly to fish and exceedingly harmful to humans.

A growing basin-wide threat is poised to exacerbate the problems associated with factory hog production. Now that the Atlantic Coast is saturated with homes and buildings, residential development is creeping up along rivers and tributaries into many counties that have been collectively identified as the "Inner Coast." With population in the Neuse River basin projected to increase by one million in the next 20 years, major developments are being proposed in both the upper and lower watersheds.

This threat is far-reaching and multifaceted. Sediment running off poorly managed developments significantly degrades water quality, but the problems continue even after construction ends. Greater populations generate more nitrogen from human and pet wastes, lawn fertilizers and auto exhausts. The spread of paved surfaces leads to huge surges in polluted runoff after storms. New construction can also harm or completely destroy vital wetlands and protective buffers along rivers. In response to projected growth, an alarming number of municipalities are not only targeting the Neuse for increased drinking water withdrawals, but also as a depository for additional sewage discharges.



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RUNAWAY DEVELOPMENT IS POISED TO RIVAL LARGE-SCALE HOG FARMING AS THE TOP POLLUTER IN THE NEUSE RIVER BASIN.



DEAN NAUDOKS

WHAT'S AT STAKE

While state and federally mandated pollution reductions have been implemented in recent years, the benefits to the health of the Neuse River have been minimal. Now, runaway development threatens to negate any progress made in improving water quality. Upstream discharges and development have already landed Falls Lake, the second largest drinking water reservoir in the state, on the 2008 list of impaired waters from excessive nutrients. The building boom is also destroying the cultural heritage of eastern North Carolina as family-owned fishing piers and fish houses are demolished to make way for condominiums. North Carolina risks losing the cultural legacy of these water-dependent communities.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

As sewage and wastewater treatment facilities reach capacity, counties throughout the Neuse River basin are gearing up to request permits to increase wastewater discharges into the river. The city of Raleigh and many counties in the upper watershed are planning to expand their sewage discharges. These activities will require permits from the NCDWQ. Rulings could come as early as summer 2007. The state agency must resist pressure to hand out more pollution permits without fully evaluating the cumulative impacts to the entire Neuse River. Furthermore, discharge permits for virtually all sewage treatment plants in the Neuse River basin come up for renewal in 2008. This is an important opportunity to clean up the river.

Second, a moratorium on new large-scale hog operations in eastern North Carolina ends in August 2007. Alternative technologies have



been developed and are available to replace lagoons and spray fields. In 2007, the North Carolina Legislature must implement a permanent ban on new lagoons and spray fields, and require the phasing out of existing lagoons and spray fields over a five-year period.

THE NEUSE RIVER IS AN INCREDIBLE NATURAL RESOURCE, PROVIDING NORTH CAROLINIANS WITH DRINKING WATER, REVENUE, RECREATION AND RELAXATION.

TAKE ACTION

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