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Lower New River Watershed pollution discussed

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— Several people met Thursday to learn about the quality of water flowing through the Lower New River Watershed and what they can do to help clean it up.

The meeting was held to gather input on the draft report of the “Lower New River — State of the Watershed” publication by the New River Clean Water Alliance and Downstream Strategies. According to the report, high levels of fecal coliform in the tributaries of the New River contribute to high levels of the pollutant in the Lower New River during high-flow events.

Fecal coliform is one indicator of human-disease-causing pathogens in fecal matter.

Erin St. John, program manager of the National Parks Conservation Association’s West Virginia field office, said the final report would be out this spring.

“After the New River was listed as impaired ... it was kind of a call to action,” St. John said. “It got us thinking about how we can take advantage of all the people who really care about this place and this river. We all want to see it clean.”

According to the report, nearly 270 miles of Lower New River streams are impaired by fecal coliform.

Don Striker, superintendent of the New River Gorge, told the audience that clean water is an integral element of future environmental health.

“In the National Park Systems, our mission is to protect our most special places for our grandchildren’s grandchildren,” Striker said. “It’s really a long-term mission, a long-term view of the world.”

Clean water, and its isolation from sewage systems, Striker said, is a fundamental skill humans developed for survival.

“The first thing, when civilizations are setting themselves up, is to figure out what’s clean water,” Striker said. “What’s the separation of water and sewer. We, as Americans, tend to take that for granted all the time, especially those of us that are at the top of the watershed.”

Fritz Boettner, of Downstream Strategies, an environmental consulting company based in Morgantown, said the problem is large but manageable. One proposed solution, he said, is to establish a network of citizens who can monitor the water quality and gather more data.

“A lot of these problems do typically exist at high-flow events,” he said. During low-flow events, “There were no exceedances at all. Nothing above water-quality criteria.”

When the water starts to rise, however, fecal coliform levels begins to rise as well, sometimes up to a hundred to five hundred times standard levels, he said. The problems, Boettner pointed out, are largely localized.

“We have leaking sewer pipes, basically, aged infrastructures that are leaking instead of going to the treatment facility. We have stormwater runoff,” Boettner said. “As places get more urban, more ‘paved over,’ so to speak, it picks up a lot of pollutants, shoves it into the stormwater drains, and off into the rivers and creeks it goes. There’s also failing septic systems. One thing in West Virginia is that due to its geology and soils, it’s never a great place for traditional septic systems.”

Piney Creek in Beckley, Wolf Creek in Oak Hill and Arbuckle Creek in Oak Hill are currently the primary sub-watersheds the group is targeting.

Jeremiah Johnson, of the Beckley Sanitary Board and the Piney Creek Watershed Association, said funding for cleaning up the Lower New River Watershed and its constituent watersheds may be the greatest challenge.

“There are a lot of problems ... and we can solve them,” Johnson said. “We do have solutions as professionals, but a lot of times it’s a funding issue.”

He said many of the problems stem from an antiquated way of dealing with sewage and stormwater. The problems from infrastructure built decades ago persist today.

“They were solving a 1920s problem. A problem with sanitation — basically getting their wastewater off their property and into the creek,” Johnson said. “That was okay at that point. Stormwater runoff wasn’t much different. Some days, I think 1920s thinking is still the same today.”

He added that another challenge is dealing with the sheer volume of water to be treated after significant rainfall events. Beckley already treats about 6 million gallons, on average, per day, he said.

“An inch of rainfall will put 28 to 30 million gallons of runoff through the system,” Johnson said. “I don’t care what you have, it becomes pretty hard to manage that amount of water and to treat it and not create downstream problems. So we’ve got our work cut out for us as a region.”

Community action, Johnson reiterated, is the key to cleaning up the area watersheds and getting attention brought to the issue.

“The wheel that squeaks gets the attention,” Johnson said. “We’ve got to squeak collectively.”

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