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Silt new target of Catawba watchdog

Riverkeeper Foundation's Muddy Water Watch is intended to curb sediment deposits from construction.

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A Catawba River watchdog group will start training volunteers next week to help stop North Carolina's leading water pollutant, sediment, from flowing into local creeks and lakes.

Muddy Water Watch, as the new program is called, will teach volunteers to monitor construction sites for sediment problems, document muddied waterways, learn to use data Web sites and snap aerial pictures after heavy rains.

Rainwater washes tons of sediment into local waters, often from construction sites. State law requires erosion-control devices when an acre or more of ground is disturbed, but inspectors are often overwhelmed by the number of assignments.

Silt from upstream development nearly fills some coves on local lakes, hurting property values and wildlife by coating the bottom with silt.

"We just don't have enough county and state folks who are able to scout the projects and keep up with them," said Pam Beck, a longtime volunteer for the Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation who's now Muddy Water Watch coordinator.

The foundation will begin training muddy-water volunteers next week in collaboration with Central Piedmont Community College's Center for Sustainability and Gaston College.

The four-week sessions will train volunteers to recognize erosion violations and know which state or local enforcers to notify, Beck said. The program plans to train volunteers across the 225-mile-long basin, including the portion in South Carolina.

John Geer, Charlotte's erosion-control administrator, said enforcers usually appreciate the public's help in spotting problems.

"It really helps if they know what they're looking at and talking about," Geer added. "So often they don't."

Geer said Muddy Water Watch volunteers could benefit from sediment-control training, open to the public, that Charlotte-Mecklenburg already offers. The one-day sessions certify site inspectors, most often company employees that the county now requires at regulated grading sites. Details are available at <http://CMCSI.charmeck.org>.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg is well staffed with enforcers compared to counties that rely solely on state inspectors.

The amount of land under development in the state's jurisdiction soared 64 percent between 2002 and 2007, The Observer reported last year, while the number of state inspectors stayed flat. State inspectors in the Charlotte region were expected to police as many as 700 sites each.

Erosion controls are also often poorly installed and maintained, Catawba Riverkeeper David Merryman has said. They're not designed to withstand storms like those that dumped up to 10 inches on Mecklenburg County last August, leaving local waters orange with mud.