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3 streams appear polluted

Authorities are checking possible construction sediment in connected creeks in western Union.

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Posted: Sunday, Oct. 05, 2008

Three streams in western Union County show signs of severe pollution, and regulators who are investigating don't know yet how it happened.

One stream runs across Idlewild Road just west of Indian Trail-Fairview Road. The second runs across Stevens Mill Road at the edge of the Fairhaven neighborhood. The third crosses Poplin Road near Seefin Court at the edge of Monroe's city limits.

The water in all three is opaque, a milky brown. They contrast dramatically with nearby streams where water is clear.

After examining photos by The Charlotte Observer, an official in the Mooresville office of the N.C. Division of Water Quality said the water appears to contain sediment, which frequently comes from construction sites.

Marcia Allocco said Friday that the agency had identified a construction company that may be linked to the pollution. However, she did not identify the company and said investigation would continue this week.

Penalties for sediment pollution could go as high as \$25,000 per day, Allocco said. For first-time offenders, the fine usually is closer to \$10,000 per day.

Allocco said the stream that crosses Stevens Mill Road appeared to be most severely polluted.

She was able to identify two of the suspect streams from a map in her office. She said the flows on Stevens Mill and Idlewild Road are "perennial streams." They run year-round.

The Idlewild Road stream flows into North Fork Crooked Creek, then into Rocky River and the Yadkin River. Much of Union County is in the Yadkin River Basin.

The streams on Stevens Mill and Poplin Roads are tributaries to the Idlewild Road stream, she said.

The Yadkin River is a source of drinking water for much of Anson County. Union County also buys water from Anson.

Union now gets much of its drinking water from the Catawba River, but needs more because of rapid population growth.

Laws require management

Sediment from a construction site would mean the builder had not met provisions of a permit required before work starts. Construction has been a major player in fast-growing Union County's economy. As part of federal and state standards, builders are required to submit plans explaining how they will control erosion and prevent sediment from flowing into the water.

Rick Roti, an activist with the Sierra Club, said laws require builders to manage run-off to protect streams.

"We've got to protect the streams or we won't have a healthy Catawba (River) or anything else," he said. "Water in the streams is important. Stuff that runs into there runs into rivers and lakes."

The state monitors some key streams to make sure they are protected and meet state water quality standards. "Generally, we pick representative sites to do water quality tests. We don't examine all the streams, we don't have the resources," Allocco said.

The agency gets steady complaints about river pollution, she said. Pollutants include animal waste, oil, sediment from erosion, and fish kills.

"A stream or body of water is classified based on how it's used," Allocco said. "Drinking water is classified as 'WS' for water supply. The standards set limits on sediment and other pollutants."

She said most streams are Class C and have lower standards for pollutants. That class includes the three polluted streams in western Union.

Allocco emphasized that the state needs help from the public in monitoring streams.

"We don't have a monitor on every stream, Allocco said. "We do rely on citizens to call. Some people in other areas have formed groups to help protect their streams."



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