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Clean Water Advocacy Group Receives Funding To Monitor Nolichucky River

A Cocke County-based environmental advocacy group is calling for volunteers to help monitor biological and chemical levels in the Nolichucky River in light of US Nitrogen's plans to use the body of water.

Clean Water Expected in East Tennessee has been awarded a grant from outdoor apparel and gear company Patagonia that will allow it to conduct a biological index and monitor chemical levels in the river, the organization announced in a news release Friday.

"CWEET is currently seeking a limited number of volunteers to commit to one year's participation in the water quality monitoring project," the release says.

The group is worried about "state-accepted levels of nitrogen, ammonia and nitric acid" that they believe could be discharged back into the river by US Nitrogen and how a discharge could affect river life, including endangered mussels, according to the release.

Environmental Quality Institute Stream Monitoring Information Exchange, based in Asheville, N.C., will handle training of 10-12 volunteers, according to CWEET Community Organizer Amelia Taylor.

She said the biological index essentially consists of counting macroinvertebrates - insects, spiders, mollusks and crustaceans -- around the river, which can provide information on the health of the river.

To her knowledge, no biological indexing of this sort is currently done in this area of the Nolichucky.

She hopes the effort could eventually turn into a partnership with Tennessee Development of Environment and Conservation officials to help provide more information on the ecosystem near the river.

"We sort of see it as hopefully a collaborative effort with the state," she said. Those interested in volunteering with CWEET have until March 15 to fill out an application from the organization's website, www.cweet.org, or by calling the non-profit at 865-453-8535.

US NITROGEN'S PLANS

US Nitrogen, owned by Cleveland, Ohio-based Austin Powder Company, will produce liquid ammonium nitrate, or ANSOL, at its Midway plant. Austin Powder will then use the ANSOL to manufacture explosives used in mining operations.

The company has been permitted to withdraw as much as 1.9 million gallons of water per day from the Nolichucky to use for its operations. Company officials said daily withdrawal averages would be closer to 1.5 million gallons per day. Additionally, the company plans to discharge about 500,000 gallons of water per day back into the Nolichucky River.

US Nitrogen Plant Manager Justin Freark has said the water going back into the river would only be used in a filtration process and would not touch components that actually produce ANSOL. In past presentations, he's called the discharge water "concentrated river water."

Still, US Nitrogen's permits from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation allow it to discharge what state officials referred to as minimal levels of nitrates, nitrites and ammonia back into the river, which is already affected by chemicals from agriculture runoff.

Plans made at the time TDEC granted US Nitrogen its permits last year called for the company discharging used cooling water back into the river. But that's no longer the case, company officials have said.

BOTH SIDES COMMENT

"This company is not concerned about the well-being of the Nolichucky River or the residents along its shores; they are concerned about one thing, their profit margin," Taylor said of Austin Powder in CWEET's release.

In an emailed statement submitted by US Nitrogen spokeswoman Amanda Shell Jennings, Freeark said the company is working to preserve the nearby environment.

"East Tennessee is our home, and we are investing heavily in environmental best practices to protect its natural resources and scenic beauty," Freeark said in the statement.

"Environmental impact to Nolichucky River by local industry is regularly checked, monitored and regulated by the TVA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and TDEC to EPA standards. US Nitrogen is accustomed to regular third-party compliance checks of its processes and outflow sampling through these governmental agencies.

"We welcome monitoring from official agencies, and we meet or exceed the stringent requirements associated with our environmental permits."

In another emailed statement, US Nitrogen Environmental Manager Hollie Binkley said a private study the company commissioned with Dinkins Biological Consulting, of Powell, Tenn., showed no mussel populations near the company's intake/discharge site at the Conway Bridge and that mussels downstream shouldn't be affected.

"The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has verified that the intake and outfall structures in the Nolichucky River will have an insignificant effect on mussel populations," she said in the statement.

In the CWEET news release, Director Deborah Barr said recent coal ash spills in North Carolina and Tennessee and pollution in the Elk River in West Virginia show the need for independent monitoring of bodies of water used by companies. "What's to say that US Nitrogen won't have an accident of the same caliber?" she said.