

Reality Check on the Pigeon River: “Blue Ridge Paper: Still Toxic After all These Years”

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HAYWOOD COUNTY, NC – A new report, based on public records, sheds a different light on a January statement from North Carolina’s State Health Director announcing that the long-standing fish consumption advisory on Pigeon River has been lifted due to lower levels of dioxin in the Pigeon.

The report, “Blue Ridge Paper Products and the Myth of a Clean Pigeon River: Still Toxic After all These Years,” shows operations at the Canton Mill have not significantly reduced toxic releases to water since the change in ownership, and that progress in reducing specific toxins in the River has stalled during the recent wastewater discharge permit. Also discussed in the report are air quality concerns due to western North Carolina’s largest producer of toxic air emissions, and a major emitter of greenhouse gases.

Levels of dioxin, a dangerous carcinogen, have been gradually decreasing in the river since Champion International, previous owner of the Canton Mill, made changes to production nearly 20 years ago in response to growing pressure from downstream activists and new federal and state requirements. While dioxin levels in Pigeon River fish have decreased, more than 110,000 pounds of toxic and hazardous chemicals were still being discharged into the Pigeon River by Blue Ridge Paper Products in 2004, according to the most recently available data from the federal Toxic Releases Inventory. These toxic and hazardous chemicals can cause health effects including cancer, respiratory, developmental and reproductive problems.

The report shows that almost no progress has been made in cleaning up the Pigeon River during the 7 years of Blue Ridge Paper Products’ ownership of the Canton Mill, despite being the subject of one of the nation’s longest Clean Water Act struggles to reduce the impacts of nearly 100 years of paper mill discharges in the river. The report, based on information submitted by Blue Ridge Paper Products to state and federal regulatory agencies, graphically presents data showing that progress in reducing “color” in the River has stalled during the recent wastewater discharge permit. In contrast, a 1997 Settlement Agreement for the river had called for continued improvement of water quality “at the quickest possible pace.”

“It’s time to counter public relations and selective information with the facts about the true condition of the River,” says Anna Slagle of Clean Water Expected for East Tennessee. “As a raft guide who spends many hours a day during the summer months in the Pigeon, I can assure you that

it holds up to its other name, the Dirty Bird. We feel the pollution in the river has devastated the minds, hearts, and lands surrounding it for long enough.”

In contradiction to contentions by Blue Ridge Paper that “water quality in the Pigeon River is safe and healthy today,” the River continues to fail to support a health aquatic population below the Mill, in part due to a decades old “thermal variance” that allows the mill to discharge hot water to the River. According to the 2003 Basinwide Plan for the French Broad River, published by the NC Div. of Water Quality’s own Bioassessment Unit, “...staff did not support the mill's contention that the river supported balanced and indigenous aquatic populations.”

In 2002, Tennessee Clean Water Network joined many of the organizations working to hold the mill accountable by calling for EPA to reopen the Blue Ridge Paper wastewater permit, and is still very concerned with the lack of progress for the river.

“The Pigeon River runs through 3 counties in Tennessee, immediately after running by Blue Ridge Paper in North Carolina. To protect Tennessee's water from pollution coming from Blue Ridge Paper it is necessary for both Tennesseans and North Carolinians to come together and hold the plant accountable to water quality standards,” says Renee Hoyos, Executive Director.

“The public has a right to know about the real conditions in the River and the massive environmental impacts of Blue Ridge Paper Products,” said Hope Taylor-Guevara of Clean Water for North Carolina, a statewide environmental justice organization with a long history of pushing for swift clean up of the Pigeon. “We find the timing of the Health Director’s announcement, and her statement about ‘an environmental success story’ very interesting, as the Mill’s wastewater discharge permit will be coming up for public comment in the next couple of months,” said Taylor-Guevara. A similar lifting of part of the Pigeon River fish consumption advisory occurred shortly before the company’s wastewater permit came up for review 5 years ago.

Blue Ridge Paper’s “Title 5” air permit is also currently up for review and environmental groups expect announcement of a public hearing soon.

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