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## **Groups Call for River Justice: Blue Ridge Paper Permit Fails to Protect or Restore the Pigeon River**

Saturday Rally to be held in Hartford, TN to "End the Stallout on Pigeon River"

Today, 12 groups today officially requested that EPA reopen and modify the Blue Ridge paper mill's 2001 permit "for cause," claiming that the Pigeon River and downstream communities deserve better than current permit requirements. According to the groups, the permit is "weak and unprotective of the river" and does not meet the goals of an important 1997 settlement to clean up the Pigeon River "at the quickest possible pace."

The controversial wastewater discharge permit was issued last November, over strenuous objections of many groups. Two of the organizations opposed to the 2001 permit include the Tennessee Environmental Council and American Canoe Association. Both were parties, along with the state of Tennessee, to a very successful Settlement Agreement for pollution reduction on the Pigeon River, signed in late 1997.

The 1997 Settlement established an EPA Technology Team on pulp and paper environmental issues, created a Technical Review Workgroup of NC, TN and EPA officials for the Canton Mill, reduced offensive dark "color" in the river by about 50% in three years, and committed all parties to further reductions in color "at the quickest possible pace." All of the groups sending the letter say this permit is a far cry from requiring what the river needs and what the company can afford. It's time to get progress moving again in one of the longest-running river justice struggles in the nation. Downstream Tennessee first talked of suing the former Champion mill for fish kills and black foamy water shortly after production began at Canton in 1908. Even the strong tools of the Clean Water Act can fail to give downstream citizens justice if state officials protect a polluter that is a major regional economic engine.

Groups sending the letter to EPA Administrator Christie Whitman and Region 4 Administrator J. I. Palmer also include Americans for a Clean Environment, Appalachian Voices, Clean Water for North Carolina, the Dead Pigeon River Council, Dogwood Alliance, Peoples' Action Coalition for the Environment, Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project, Tennessee Clean Water Network, and Western North Carolina Group of the NC Chapter of the Sierra Club.

The organizations, collectively known as the Pigeon River Action Group, have called for a "Rally for the Pigeon River" this Saturday in Hartford, TN to start at 11:00 AM. The program will include music, speakers, an overdue water bill for 30 billion gallons of water polluted for profit since 1999, and a memorial tribute to Haywood County's Dick Mullinax. Mullinax was a former packaging engineer who died early last year after committing most of his retirement to being a thorn in the side of the Canton Mill's former owner, Champion International, to get them to clean up the River.

Bob Seay of the Dead Pigeon River Council, based in Newport, TN, nearly 50 miles downstream from the Canton Mill, says the river has looked worse this year than in more than five years. "It's an ongoing environmental injustice that the Pigeon River and the people of Cocke County suffer

while Blue Ridge goes right on making its profits. Some of the union people who promised us "environmental stewardship" during the buyout from Champion really meant it, but they got shoved aside. Most of them and the New York investors don't give a damn. This story needs to end—either clean up our river or close the Mill."

Gretta Jones, spokesperson for Cocke County's "JustUs Troupe" performing poetry company, says "Blue Ridge should comply with the Clean Water Act WITHOUT further variances. The children and families downstream deserve as clean a river as the children and families enjoy above the mill."

"We did our best to support this company in creating sustainable jobs and safer processes while continuing the river clean up at a good clip," says Hope Taylor-Guevara of Clean Water for North Carolina, a research biochemist turned enviro executive. "Many of us were part of the "Back the Buyout" campaign and shared the costs of a cooperative study on oxygen-based pulping and bleaching last year. NC regulators and investors want the Mill keep to keep on polluting for profit with only trivial improvements. No dice. We know too much about what's possible for this magnificent river."

David Jenkins, Conservation Director for the American Canoe Association, is determined to hold the company and regulators who have blocked progress accountable. "The weak permit issued by DWQ, combined with recent statements by Blue Ridge Paper indicating they will not implement key technologies recommended by EPA for this permit period, clearly place both North Carolina and Blue Ridge in violation of the 1997 Settlement Agreement."

"While this may seem like a complex issue, there is a simple way to view this problem. If there is reliable and cost-effective technology to clean this river, then North Carolina has an obligation to make that happen. Period." says Danielle Droitsch, Executive Director of Tennessee Clean Water Network.

While the river has seen increasing use due to water quality improvements following the Agreement, rafting and other river tourism in low wealth Cocke County could easily double if the clean up is required to keep going. Steve Hodges of Americans for a Clean Environment is a former raft guide who helped to post the river with dioxin warnings back in the late 1980's. "We've always said chlorine-free production is what the river needs. If they had done that in the '90s, we'd have a cleaner, safer river now. Now that the oxygen bleaching study has shown they can go chlorine-free step by step, there's *really* no excuse. Clean it up now."