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Water quality report gives state D+ grade

Sunday, September 06, 2009

By Ben Raines

Mobile Press-Register

Environmentalists cite failure to set dumping limits

MOBILE - Alabama has failed to implement portions of the federal Clean Water Act, earning a D+ on a water quality report card prepared by environmental groups.

The report, issued last week by the Gulf Restoration Network and the Alabama Rivers Alliance, did not examine whether Alabama is properly enforcing federal environmental policy. Instead, the group, "asked the much more basic question of whether we even have these policies on our books," said Mitch Reid of the Rivers Alliance.

Alabama Department of Environmental Management spokesman Scott Hughes dismissed the report, saying the groups had failed to even talk to state officials about "the tremendous progress made in the last 10 years."

"It's frustrating that neither of these groups has made any effort to contact the department to find out about the work we've done. At best, it seems like an effort to get people to write checks to donate money to them," Hughes said. "At worst, it has made our scientists take time out of their busy days to respond to this publicity stunt."

Other Gulf states didn't fare any better on the Clean Up Your Act! Report Card released Wednesday, save for Texas, which earned a "C."

Alabama's grade was low because ADEM failed to set limits on the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus that can be dumped into rivers and Mobile Bay by industry and municipal sewer systems, according to the groups. Such limits are called for under the Clean Water Act.

In the Mobile area, for example, nitrogen pollution comes from sources such as the Mobile Area Water and Sewer System, which dumps much of its effluent into Mobile Bay near the McDuffie Island Coal Terminal, and from golf courses and farming operations.

According to ADEM permits, the ThyssenKrupp steel mill being built on the Tombigbee River will use large amounts of nitric acid to pickle stainless steel, meaning more nitrogen discharged into Mobile Bay when that facility starts running....

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