

# Other views

## Environmental catastrophe inspires rebirth of Reedy River

By David L. Hargett

Thursday, June 26, 1996, is a day of infamy for the Reedy River and for the Upstate. On that sultry summer night, a pipeline owned by Colonial Pipeline, carrying diesel fuel from Texas to New Jersey, ruptured catastrophically. The break released a million gallons of toxic diesel fuel to the Reedy River 16 miles below Greenville. Ten years have now passed since the front-page headline of *The Greenville News* turned our stomachs with "Now they call it the River of Death."

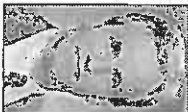
This horrific release was the worst by far in state history. It was no ordinary leak, but one of the largest petroleum spills to inland waters in U.S. history. All along the river, the heavy odor of diesel was wretched. The spill was especially upsetting to the neighboring community, resulting in evacuations of homes, damage to private properties and abundant anxiety for nearby residents. This event devastated the Reedy for at least 23 miles, all the way to

Boyd Mill Pond in Laurens County. The fuel coated every living thing in its path, killing the fish and wildlife, annihilating the biological integrity of the river. Now, 10 years later, the Reedy continues to recover from this spectacular insult.

The purpose of this column is not to condemn Colonial's admitted negligence of its pipeline. Nor is it to revisit how small the penalties were compared to its profits for the "big oil" companies that own Colonial. But, make no mistake, this was a major environmental crime. Two federal fines against Colonial for various criminal and civil charges related to violations of the Clean Water Act, for this and numerous other oil spills around the country, produced \$41 million for federal coffers. Unfortunately, not a penny of those millions was available to restore the Reedy River.

Good news worthy of our reflection 10 years later is what has happened for the Reedy River and the Upstate, thanks

### GUEST COLUMN



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in large part to actions by the state of South Carolina. In response to the Reedy spill, the state reached a \$6.5 million civil settlement with Colonial, the largest environmental fine in state history. Led by Friends of the Reedy River, many citizens spoke out after the state's settlement was announced in 1998, demanding this money be

set aside for projects aimed at resurrecting the Reedy from its apparent "death."

In response, South Carolina established the Reedy River Restoration Fund, overseen by the state's natural resources trustees and led by the Department of Natural Resources. Under the eye of public scrutiny, the trustees developed the Reedy River Restoration Plan.

This plan addresses 14 objectives identified to restore a river damaged not just by the Colonial fuel spill but equally impacted by 200 years of industrialization, neglect and unbridled growth in the Reedy's watershed. Key goals of the plan include protection of riparian corridors along the Reedy, improved public recreational access, enhanced wildlife habitat, reduction of both point and non-point sources of contaminants degrading water quality, and public education on water quality and watershed protection.

Although this work is still in progress, these initiatives have had tremendous positive impact

and, as a result, the Reedy and other Upstate resources are better off today.

Many innovative, beneficial projects have been developed as a result of the Colonial spill. The crowning achievement is acquisition of Lake Conestee, on the Reedy River six miles below Greenville, by the Conestee Foundation. A grant of \$200,000 from the Colonial settlement enabled this purchase. That modest investment has now been multiplied more than 20-fold through other grants, programs and contributions. A truly exciting outcome will be the opening of Lake Conestee Nature Park this fall.

The Colonial incident also helped to focus attention on the vulnerability of Lake Greenwood, farther downstream. Based partly on this newfound awareness, the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium was created with funding by private benefactors. SRWC is a partnership of academic organizations, public agencies, nonprofits and private interests with

exceptional capabilities to address the Upstate's water resources issues. Under the leadership of Upstate Forever, SRWC is actively engaged in scientific studies, policy analysis and public outreach addressing water quality concerns in the region. Research by these partners, and others, has dramatically increased our understanding of the condition of our Upstate waters. This knowledge is the foundation from which we can now effectively protect our waters from wanton degradation by a burgeoning Upstate population.

It is a good thing that Colonial has substantially improved its operations to better protect the environment, largely as a result of federal and state penalties. But that headline, "The River of Death," went far beyond the enforcement actions, and struck a clarion call to everyone in the Upstate. This tragedy roused our conscience and stirred the pride and vigilance necessary to protect the water resources essential to our economy and our quality of life.