

Contaminated streams are no worse, no better



A swallow glides above Donkey Creek near Butler Spaeth Road on Monday morning. A recent report showed that the pollution in Donkey Creek and Stonepile Creek has not worsened, but at the same time it has not gotten any better. - *News-Record photos by Nathan Payne*

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A new report shows contaminated streams in Campbell County have not gotten worse, but haven't improved either.

The report, completed by the Campbell County Conservation District in conjunction with WWC Engineering out of Sheridan shows streams in Campbell County, including Stonepile and Donkey Creeks that run through Gillette, have had relatively stable levels of bacteria since 2007. But those levels are too high, according to Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality standards.

STREAM HISTORY

How did the streams become contaminated?

Donkey and Stonepile Creeks have been on the DEQ's list of Wyoming's impaired waters for the last 10 years for exceeding E. coli levels. E. coli is a bacteria found in animal and human feces that can cause illness in people if it is ingested in large enough amounts.

The bacteria is not coming from a single source, but rather a variety of sources called "non-point source pollution" that makes it difficult to stop.

Why clean them up?

The creeks flow through Gillette and receive all of the overland water flow from the city and surrounding area. They flow through several of Gillette's parks, where pets and children have easy access to the creeks.

Donkey creek also is the tributary to the Fishing Lake at Dalbey Memorial Park, which also is listed as impaired.

STUDY RESULTS

What's the good news?

Despite spikes in bacteria levels during spring months in 2007, 2008 and 2009 when water runoff was high and a few spikes at different monitoring spots, the streams do not seem to be getting worse. Michelle Cook, Campbell County Conservation District manager, said she is encouraged by that finding.

What's the bad news?

The report shows that in addition to high bacterial levels, there were increased chloride and ammonia concentrations at the down-stream sites of Donkey Creek east of Gillette each fall.

Results of the study indicate that Donkey and Stonepile Creeks are the sources of chloride and bacteria that are contaminating the Belle Fourche River, which is listed as impaired for the pollutants below the confluence with Donkey Creek, but not above it.

STEPS TO CLEAN CREEKS

What's the path forward?

Officials are not expecting the creeks to improve until funding is available to address the pollution problems and help educate Gillette residents about preventing E. coli and other pollutants from entering the streams.

That funding is expected to be available when a detailed plan called a "Total Maximum Daily Load" is completed for the upper Belle Fourche Watershed.

A draft of that report is expected to be finished by late 2010. The actual improvements should begin in about 2012, Cook said.

"So right now they have put us on hold until that TMDL is done because they said there is no point in giving us money to do (improvements) until we know what the problems are," Cook said.

The Conservation District plans to continue monitoring water quality in the two streams. Cook expects to see improvements when the study is done again.

What can you do?

Public involvement is key to improving water quality within Campbell County.

Residents not connected to public sewer should know the location of their septic tanks and leach fields and be aware of potential failures.

Residents within Gillette city limits should be aware that the storm sewer drains along streets drain into Donkey and Stonepile Creeks.

Landowners should inspect corrals and look for other potential contamination sources after heavy rains when runoff will carry contamination.