

Donkey Creek E. coli gets DEQ attention



Debbie Hepp records readings from an instrument while Michelle Cook collects samples from Donkey Creek near Garner Lake Road during a sampling day in June. - *News-Record* photo by Nathan Payne

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High levels of E. coli and other contaminants remain flowing through Gillette's Donkey and Stonepile creeks and now the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality is stepping in to clean them up.

Samples taken this summer by the Campbell County Conservation District have been similar to those taken last summer, which raised some concern from both the Conservation District and Campbell County Public Health Department.

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. The Fishing Lake is being tested for high levels of phosphorus and sediments that have kept it on Wyoming's List of Impaired Waterbodies since 1996.

Last August, the Campbell County Health Department warned the public against swimming or letting pets swim in the Fishing Lake and the creeks because of E. coli.

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.

What is called a "Total Maximum Daily Load" plan is being implemented for the two creeks as well as the entire Belle Fourche River watershed.

The DEQ's TMDL coordinator Don Newton was in Gillette on Tuesday to tour Donkey and Stonepile creeks to prepare to start the process.

"A Total Maximum Daily Load tells you how much of a particular pollutant a stream can assimilate but still meet water quality standards" Newton said. "We know the standards aren't met right now within certain parameters."

DEQ will be pointing out where E. coli and other pollutants are coming from and what needs to be done to stop it.

"We will look at potential sources, where the pollutants are coming from, what types of land use practices and point sources (are contributing)," Newton said.

The TMDL will say what percentage of the pollutants are coming from each source and how much they need to be reduced. The plan will attempt to reduce levels of pollutants to levels that occur naturally.

The DEQ is getting involved because the Belle Fourche watershed has been listed as an Impaired Waterbody since 1996. Under federal law, a TMDL has to be started within 13 years of a waterbody being listed. Donkey Creek was put on the Impaired Waterbodies list in 2000.

One of the main sources polluting the creeks could be non-point source pollution from Gillette. Pet waste in people's yards along with wild animals could be contributing. Everything on the roads, driveways, parking lots and yards from north of Gillette, subdivisions along Force Road and as far south as the Antelope Valley and Sleepy Hollow subdivisions drain into Donkey Creek.

Michelle Cook, Campbell County Conservation District manager, is encouraged by DEQ's involvement. She took Newton around the sites she has been testing for several years.

The TMDL will make federal money available for projects that could help clean up the creeks like moving corrals that are close to the stream, Cook said.

PUBLIC MEETING: The Conservation District and DEQ are asking for as much public involvement as possible. The results of the TMDL could have effects on Gillette residents and landowners near Donkey Creek.

There will be at least four public meetings on Donkey and Stonepile creeks with the first one occurring sometime in October.

The initial public meeting will give the public an idea of what the process will be and will allow them to ask questions, Newton said.

"As different parts of the TMDL are developed, we will be presenting that to the public and getting their input and their concerns answered," Newton said.

Exact dates for the public meeting will be posted on the Conservation District Web site and in The News-Record sometime in September.

What's affected

- **Donkey Creek:** One of Gillette's main drainage channels that drains the south end of town. It begins near Force Road and Hidden Valley and flows east toward Sutherland Estates, Gillette College and the Technical Education Center, then on to Fishing Lake in Dalbey Memorial Park. It leaves the Fishing Lake and flows east past the water treatment plant and Fox Park. It feeds into the Belle Fourche River in Crook County.

- **Stonepile Creek:** Stonepile Creek rarely looks like a real creek unless there have been heavy rains. It begins near Echeta Road and flows east toward Bicentennial Park before heading south to Cam-plex. It combines with Donkey Creek just east of the wastewater treatment plant.

- **Fishing Lake:** A 25-acre lake located at the southeastern end of Gillette in Dalbey Memorial Park south of Lakeway Road and just off of South Douglas Highway. Donkey Creek runs into and through Fishing Lake and exits the lake on its way east. The park is a popular recreation area and the lake is stocked by the Wyoming Department of Game and Fish with trout every year.