Watershed Insights Report No. 4

Public Opinion on the Saluda-Reedy Watershed: Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviors

In January 2004, the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium (SRWC) initiated a public opinion research effort to gauge the views on watershed issues. This research endeavor consisted of a telephone survey of Upstate residents and web-surveys of the general public, municipal officials, environmental professionals, and developers. This Watershed Insights Report presents the results of the telephone survey.

Between May and July 2004, data were collected from 855 individuals residing within the boundaries of the Saluda-Reedy watershed. The survey results reveal a complex picture of watershed attitudes, knowledge and behaviors.

Residents of the Saluda-Reedy watershed have a high level of concern about water quality of local streams and rivers. Eighty six percent of respondents are "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" about watershed health. Those who indicated they were "very concerned" about water quality tended to be women, have lower levels of education and lived in rural/downstream communities. This level of concern is comparable to concern found in other watersheds.

Overall, respondents feel the quality of local waterways has degraded over time. While nearly a third of respondents (30.8 %) agreed that water quality had remained the same over the past 10 years, more believed water quality had become worse over the past 10 years (55.2%) and 25 years (63.3%).

Despite this high level of concern about water quality, watershed residents have a low level of knowledge about watersheds. When asked to choose the correct definition of the watershed, only 27.3% of respondents selected the correct answer ("area that drains into specific river or lake"). Nearly half of the respondents (48.5%) chose "reservoir that serves as a municipal water source" as the correct definition. Several major surveys of watershed issues document much higher levels of knowledge about the definition of a watershed in other regions. ***Aside from the need for more education about the basics of watershed, there is also a need for information about practices that are effective for managing land along waterways.*** More than 80 percent of respondents incorrectly indicated that keeping vegetation mowed to the edge of the water was an effective way to improve water quality.

Residents were also asked to assess the impact of various types of pollution on local water quality. ***Although residents do have a basic understanding of the various causes of poor water quality, little connection is made between the various causes of pollution.*** Construction of homes and roads, two activities that seem to relate to growth in the Upstate, did not cause as much concern among respondents as did growth in the Upstate in general. Fewer than a third of respondents felt that these two sources of pollution had a "great impact" on water quality, as compared to 51% indicating growth in the Upstate had a "great impact" on water quality.

Which of the following best fits your definition of a watershed? Percent of Respondents (n=741)

DEFINITION	*% responses*
Low area that retains water	*7.9%*
Area that drains into a specific river or lake	*27.3%*
Reservoir that serves as a municipal water source	*48.5%*
Small building where water is stored	*9.9%*
None of the options mentioned	*6.4%*

For the most part, watershed residents are engaging in environmentally responsive behaviors. The participation rates were highest for planting a tree (64.9%) and reducing water usage (59.2%). Fewer residents indicated they had reduced or eliminated pesticide use (51.7%) and fertilizer use (45.7%), two activities which are often the target of watershed education campaigns. Participation rates for positive behaviors were significantly lower than rates recorded in other watersheds. Also, despite indications of "environmentally friendly" behaviors, some residents are engaging in behaviors that could harm local rivers and streams (e.g., using fertilizers and leaving pet waste in their yards). On a more positive note, nearly all respondents indicated they store fertilizers and pesticides in safe containers and do not dispose of oil in storm drains.

An encouraging sign is that Saluda-Reedy watershed residents are quite willing to get involved in efforts to improve water quality. ***Fifty percent of respondents indicated that they would be most likely to get involved if they could personally save money,*** but a still higher level (75%) if they were directly impacted in some way by pollution. When compared to other watersheds, respondents were much more likely to indicate they would get involved in efforts to improve water quality. ***Residents are also generally willing to pay extra on their water bills to improve water quality.***

The survey results underscore a huge opportunity to improve citizen knowledge of water resources and living within a watershed. These results provide an important starting point for designing and implementing watershed education efforts in the Saluda-Reedy watershed. Watershed residents expressed a high level of concern about the quality of local waterways. An effective education and outreach program can help to translate this concern into positive action. The results from this survey will serve as a baseline for determining the ultimate success of SRWC's education efforts.

This project was sponsored by the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium and has involved technical work by Clemson University. Watershed Insights Report No. 4, authorized for release by SRWC on 9 August 2005. Key Contact: Dr. Catherine Mobley, Clemson University, camoble@clemson.edu.

The SRWC is a broad-based group of universities, public agencies, private consultants, and non-profit organizations focused on assuring "Clean, Healthy and Abundant Water for a Sustainable Economy and Environment Throughout the Saluda-Reedy Watershed". For more info, visit www.saludareedy.org.