River plan riding strong current of optimism



Creating a Twelve Mile River Blueway could open up more of the river for recreation, including hiking and kayaking, which are already popular on other parts of the river.

Blueway could get dollars flowing to area

Once PCBs gone, Twelve Mile seen as lure for recreation

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CATEECHEE — Plans for a Twelve Mile River Blueway recreation area to be created with assistance from the National Park Service include a wide and scenic swath of Pickens County stretching from the river across part of Lake Hartwell to Issaqueena Lake.

Area residents who have been pushing for decades to restore the PCB-blighted river and Lake Hartwell say the Park Service's effort will help reverse the stigma and create an enhanced destination for boaters, hikers and anyone who wants to enjoy the outdoors.

It's a project that supporters said transforms contaminated waters into a resource that will benefit local residents and bring tourism and economic benefits to the area.

A blueway is like a greenway except on water. The planned blueway recreation area includes at least 10 miles of the Twelve Mile River upstream of State 137 and several miles of future free-flowing whitewater in the Twelve Mile Gorge, said Chris Starker, rural waters project associate with Upstate Forever.

It also includes about 15 miles of flat-water paddling where the Twelve Mile and Keowee rivers form the backwaters of Lake Hartwell on the western edge of Pickens County. The area also takes in the pristine shoreline of the Clemson Experimental Forest and holds the potential for a three- or four-mile "trail of waterfalls" in the Clemson Forest and Twelve Mile Gorge.

The National Park Service has accepted the project proposal and will help create a recreation plan for the river, Starker said.

"This is a project that residents will be proud of, and it will draw tourists as well," Starker said.

Clemson's Experimental Forest has about 100 miles of shoreline along Lake Hartwell, offering "many opportunities to advance natural resource education in an environment rich in botanical diversity, scenic waterfalls and historic sites," said Knight Cox, Clemson forest manager.

The project transforms the Twelve Mile River and an area of Lake Hartwell where health advisories warn against eating certain fish because of PCB contamination into "a resource, an attraction and an opportunity," Starker said.

"You're taking this PCB blight away and transforming it into something positive," Starker said.

Contaminated sediment is currently being dredged from the Twelve Mile River under a 2006 court-ordered settlement and two dams are slated for removal, which will create the future whitewater passage.

"With the mitigation of the PCBs and the restoration of the river, it is the right time to take the next step, reclaiming the river and the lake for the community," said Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association.

When the dams are gone and the river is restored, Ross Self, chief of freshwater fisheries for the state Department of Natural Resources, said the Twelve Mile should support "a diverse group" of native species," including a form of redeye bass found only in South Carolina and Georgia.

Funding for removal of a third dam upstream that is owned by the Easley-Central Water District is under consideration of settlement trustees. The project is not dependent on removal of the third dam but its removal would open up river habitat to fish populations of Lake Hartwell, Starker said.