

South Saluda River project



Members of Saluda River Roots gather on the riverbank in support of halting changes to the river. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

Plan raises fishermen's hopes, neighbors' fears

Judge says rocks will boost water quality, wildlife

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CLEVELAND — Despite an administrative law judge's decision against their efforts to prevent placement of rock vanes in the river, many mountain residents on the South Saluda River press on even as the start of the project draws near.

"I'm one of 102 land-owners up here who object to that project," said Van



SUZIE RIDDLE/Staff

Allen, who has lived for 28 years by the river that flows along the Greenville-Pickens county line between the majestic silhouettes of Caesars Head

and Table Rock.

"This is a beautiful, natural river, and we want to keep it in the same condition that it is in," Allen said. "We haven't given up.

We're still trying to stop them."

Digging tons of rock into the river bed will increase flooding — already a problem in heavy or persistent rain — as well as sedimentation and erosion, said river resident Lib Tickle, who asked Pickens County Council to help fight the project.

On the other side of the debate are conservation groups armed with state and federal permits and ready to begin the work they say will improve the river, which has been stocked with trout since the 1930s, by enhancing

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habitat for trout and other fish.

"We're not trying to do anything but enhance this resource that should be enjoyed by the public," said John Tynan, deputy director of Upstate Forever, one partner in the \$104,000 project funded mainly by a Natural Resource Conservation Service grant and private gifts.

"This is a great project. It is a great thing for the community, and it's a great thing for the river," said Frank Holleman, president of Naturaland Trust.

One side wants to add rock structures to provide pools and protected places for trout to hide from predators, lay eggs and eat. The other side wants the river left alone and fears tampering could bring unintended consequences and irreparable harm.

Elsewhere in Pickens County, there's similar debate over the impact of work on the Twelve Mile River, where removal of two dams that held back decades of PCB contamination has unleashed major changes some fear could bring further injury rather than intended healing.

The South Saluda "is not broken. It doesn't need fixing," said resident Brenda Brooks. "Bringing in heavy equipment doesn't sound very environmentally friendly. There are rivers right upstream that are colder where trout naturally reproduce."

The river already contains some reproducing trout and could be the first former trout stream in the state to have a vigorous

population fished
man said.

"We've lost nearly 90 percent of the trout waters in our state," Tynan said.

Pickens County Council Chairwoman Jennifer Willis said the council wants to ensure that county residents downstream from the project aren't negatively impacted.

The county would like to see formal design plans and hydrology studies, but because the work will be done from the Greenville County side of the river, Pickens County has been told it doesn't have jurisdiction, Willis said.

"We will probably write a couple of letters" to the county delegation, she said.

The project has approval from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the state Department of Health and Environmental Control and the Greenville County flood administrator, which all have said the work should have no or minimal impact on the river, Tynan said.

Engineering drawings show typical structures rather than specifics for each location because plans need to be flexible so the structures can be placed appropriately for each location in the river, Tynan said.

A recent decision by Administrative Law Judge Carolyn C. Matthews said Tickle, who challenged the DHEC permit, failed to prove that DHEC erred in issuing it. The project will benefit fish, wildlife and water quality, and environmental impacts can be avoided, Matthews wrote in her order.

The project consists of placing 15 rock vanes in the river and restoring and

pull-offs on the south side of State 11 near the river, Holleman said.

A wide, paved parking area on the other side of the highway will remain open to the public, he said.

Work will start in coming weeks and should be done this fall, he said.

The nonprofit group and private landowner Dianna Culbertson own the two parcels containing the stretch of river near State 11 where the rock will be placed. Holleman said he represents both Naturaland and Culbertson.

Culbertson said she is happy with the plans. She said her husband, now deceased, was an avid fisherman and would have liked the project.

For years the river has been accessible to the public from State 11 through Naturaland property and will remain open to the public except during construction, when access will be closed for safety reasons, Holleman said.

Residents fear there's more to the project than what's being presented. Tickle said she's seen documents indicating 28 structures will be placed in the river in two phases. Allen said there are 32 markings on the highway indicating where vanes will go in.

Residents also "suspect" the vanes, which channel water toward the center of the river are "more for kayaks than trout use," Allen said.

Holleman said 15 structures is the total for both phases — 10 in the first phase and five in the second. Kayakers do use the river, which is public water, however this project is to improve trout habitat, Holleman said.