

Public meeting on cleaning up Looney Creek Dec. 7

A public meeting to discuss implementing voluntary plans to clean up Looney Creek and its tributaries—which include Mill Creek and Back Creek—will be held Thursday, Dec. 7 at 7 p.m. in Buchanan Elementary School.

Looney Creek and its tributaries south of Buchanan are on Virginia's list of impaired or "dirty" waters because bacteria level in the streams exceed Virginia water quality standards.

The levels of bacteria measured by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) indicate an increased risk of illness for people who come in direct contact with the water.

The Looney Creek watershed is in the eastern section of Botetourt on the western slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and it generally includes the area that parallels US 11 between Troutville and Buchanan.

The mouth of Looney Creek on the James River is next to Limestone Park in Buchanan.

The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) is beginning to work with local government representatives and citizens to develop a plan to reduce the bacteria in the streams so that the risk of illness is reduced.

A public meeting a couple years ago in Buchanan was the first step in the process to address the high bacteria count that primarily comes from livestock and wildlife using the stream and failing septic systems.

The implementation plan, as it is called, will outline the voluntary improvements—or best management practices (BMP)—needed to reduce the sources of bacteria and their associated costs and benefits, according to an announcement about the public meeting from the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission.

Examples of BMPs to reduce the bacteria sources include repairing failing septic systems, fencing livestock from streams and establishing vegetated stream buffers.

The plan will also identify measurable goals and a schedule to implement the plan.

DEQ and DCR officials want citizen participation and input at the December 7 meeting. Following a brief presentation outlining the implementation plan development, those at the meeting will begin to discuss and evaluate different ways to clean up the streams, including voluntary programs that offer financial incentives for landowners to install BMPs.

Citizens will have additional opportunities to participate in the plan development through working groups that will begin to meet in January.

The working groups will identify ways to reduce residential and agricultural sources of bacteria entering the streams.

The implementation of this plan will provide an opportunity for citizens in the Looney Creek, Mill Creek and Back Creek area to help improve water resources, increase farm production and increase property values in their community, according to the regional commission's announcement.

For example, there are currently 10 similar projects to reduce stream contamination ongoing in Virginia. These projects have assisted farmers to install livestock exclusion (fencing) systems along more than 30 miles of streams and have addressed human sources through the replacement or improvement of more than 70 waste treatment systems, and more than 210 septic tank pumpouts.

Strong local public participation ensures an implementation plan driven by local input, according to the regional commission. Community involvement in the creation of the plan, and support of its implementation are critical factors that will determine the success of efforts to improve water quality locally, the commission says.

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