



## **Nature preserve could help Lake Wylie water quality**

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GASTON COUNTY -- A planned 95-acre nature preserve on the South Fork Catawba River may not actually be on Lake Wylie, but the lake will feel its impact.

Catawba Lands Conservancy recently announced a donation of 95 acres on the South Fork north of Cramerton by Pharr Yarns and the Carstarphen family. The land, to be called the Pharr Yarns Preserve, will join the 15-county Carolina Thread Trail and provide walking trails and river access on 3.45 miles of river frontage. Catawba Riverkeeper David Merryman says the move could help improve the quality of Lake Wylie water downstream.

"Urban and suburban sprawl has continued to increase pressure on our river's quality and quantity resources," he said, "so every stretch of stream and river corridor upstream of Lake Wylie placed into conservation, whether on the South Fork Catawba or main stem Catawba, helps protect the lake."

Particularly on the South Fork, conservation of land could help a longstanding concern for the Riverkeeper Foundation. In 1998, the first year of the foundation, original Riverkeeper Donna Lisenby began preparing a federal Clean Water Act case against North Carolina for issuing mill permits she said violated water quality standards and turned the South Fork into "Rainbow River." In 2001, the foundation fought for color control requirements for dischargers of textile mill dyes, and in 2003, published a two-year study of water quality on the South Fork.

Where the South Fork branch and main Catawba River stem meet at the state line on Lake Wylie has for years been a flushing out point, water quality experts say, with the traditionally cleaner Catawba mixing with and diluting the South Fork.

"In general the water quality of the main Catawba River is better than the South Fork," said David Buetow, senior environmental specialist with Mecklenburg County Land Use & Environmental Services Agency. "The South Fork generally has higher nutrient levels than the main Catawba River and after large rain events also has elevated levels of sediment and bacteria."

The reason for the difference in nutrients is fairly simple, Buetow said. The South Fork has no reservoirs upstream like Lake Norman and Mountain Island Lake on the main Catawba, which can "filter and settle out pollutants." By preserving large tracts of land along the water, as the Pharr Yarns preserve will, water quality should improve with the addition of a large buffer similar to county-mandated ones all along Lake Wylie, experts said. Good news,

Buetow said, for an area always toward the bottom of water quality standards by comparison.

"It is fair to say that the South Fork has shown poorer water quality than the main Catawba and has ever since I started working on the these reservoirs in the mid-1970s," he said.

Planners of the Pharr Yarns Preserve and Carolina Thread Trail say more than 2 million people in the Carolinas eventually will benefit from the 15-county effort. The Pharr Yarns site alone includes 69 acres of wetlands and 18,000 feet of river frontage.

"This gift furthers the family's legacy in Gaston County," said Dave Cable, executive director of Catawba Lands Conservancy, of the Carstarphens. "This project offers multiple benefits for the community – it conserves land, provides public access and protects water quality and wildlife."

The gift also "ensures that a significant portion of the trail will be built this year," Cable said. Gaston County adopted its overall trail plan in March 2009, which identified the South Fork as a "priority corridor." With a \$74,484 trail implementation grant, the first 3.5-mile stretch of natural surface trail will be completed this summer. Eventually the trail will run 9.5 miles along the South Fork.

"Gaston County has seen rapid growth over the last decade," said Bill Carstarphen, also a Thread Trail board member along with wife Carol, "making it critical that we act now to ensure that our children and grandchildren inherit a green and prosperous place to call home."

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