

Payson Roundup

Group hopes to reduce bacteria in creeks

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Bacteria has been seeping into the Tonto and Christopher creeks through generations of cesspools and failed sewer systems, among other things, and a group is forming to help clean the water.

The conglomeration of tourists relieving themselves too close to the rivers and even the Tonto Creek Fish Hatchery, which has added excessive levels of nitrogen to the water, also contribute, according to the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality.

Seventy people showed up recently to the first meeting of a watershed committee, which is dedicated to reducing the loads of E. coli and nitrogen in the Tonto and Christopher creeks.

"I think we're all concerned about keeping this area clean. The more it develops, the more chances of pollution," said Larry Fultz, the Tonto Rim Christian Camp's executive director and host of the watershed group's first meeting.

"We're not opposed to tourists, we're just trying to let people understand and know they are contributing factors," Fultz said.

When development near Tonto and Christopher creeks began in the early 1900s, no guidelines or regulations existed for sewage systems, according to an overview provided by Gila County Environmental Health Wastewater Department Manager Jake Garrett.

As a result, "sewage 'systems' evolved from outhouses to hand-dug and home-poured septic tanks with no bottoms (cesspools) and maybe hand-dug leach lines, all downhill from the home toward the creek," Garrett wrote.

ADEQ began testing waterways statewide in the mid-1990s, and the results led to the agency's listing of the two creeks as impaired.

A study which examined how much of these contaminants the water can safely carry, called a Total Maximum Daily Load, incorporates monitoring and community involvement to reduce the waterway's bacteria until it's below budgeted levels.

The most affected areas include developments of Bear Flat, Tonto Creek Estates, Kohl's Ranch, Tonto Rim Christian Camp, Camp Tontozona and the R-C Scout Camp.

County wastewater staff also believes Tonto Village and Christopher Creek residents contribute to the bacteria levels via underground flows, according to Garrett's material.

"We have to take this seriously," Garrett said. If nothing is done, signs warning people against swimming or eating the fish could become necessary, which Garrett said would hurt the area's economy.

"The first time one of these (signs) are posted," he added, "that's where the reality will really strike."

The levels of bacteria in the rivers aren't always elevated. They tend to increase during periods of high recreation use, according to ADEQ.

Garrett said he asked someone from ADEQ if he should be concerned that his grandson swims frequently in those waters. The man answered that he wouldn't let his grandson swim there, and Garrett immediately took the same approach.

That was five years ago, but Garrett says the improvements since then have hopefully helped.

Several winters ago, the county applied for and received two grants that each totaled roughly \$255,000 to install new septic systems. At least three of the systems replaced with the help of a grant received in 2006 were discharging untreated sewage directly into Tonto Creek.

In June of last year, the Tonto Rim Christian Camp received an ADEQ grant to replace its septic tanks, which were also leaking straight into Tonto Creek. In the grant, the camp said it would help start the watershed management group. The group's first meeting late last month served as an informational gathering.

The committee will begin the process of writing bylaws and becoming a recognized nonprofit at its next meeting, which will occur sometime in mid-May.

Through outreach, education and collaboration with governmental agencies, they hope to clean up the river.

"We're going to make the public aware of a number of things," Fultz said. The group will likely hang signs in the forest, alerting people to the location of vaulted toilets and reminding them not to litter.

Local students can receive education through schools or camps, and people with failing septic systems can continue to apply for grants to pay for new ones.

ADEQ considers nitrogen from the fish hatchery a different type of pollutant because it has a specific discharge location, and so the agency can regulate ways of fixing it.

More information: www.tontorimcamp.com.

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