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The work may not be much fun, and it might get a little dirty. But the job of the Muddy Water Watch is important, organizers say.

The group's mission is to monitor construction sites to make sure builders follow the rules that aim to minimize environmental harm from construction.

Dean Naujoks, the Upper Neuse riverkeeper who started the program, noted that the group American Rivers has named the Neuse one of the 10 most endangered rivers for the year 2007.

Naujoks started the Muddy Water Watch program to try to stop the damage to the local watershed and to bring more awareness of the issue to the public.

"We want to change the culture that says, 'It's just dirt, it's not a big deal,' " Naujoks said. "It has completely destroyed a lot of aquatic habitat and degraded streams," he said.

Mell Nevils, land quality section chief in the state Division of Land Resources, the agency that enforces the state's Sedimentation and Pollution Control Act, appreciates the help.

The state has 32 inspectors to cover about 9,000 construction sites, Nevils said. He said the Sediment Control Commission, appointed by the governor about 10 years ago, recommended that construction sites be inspected once a month. The actual rate of inspection is much less frequent.

"Sediment is the number one pollutant by volume in the state of North Carolina," Nevils said.

Citizens who sign up for the Muddy Water Watch project will get training designed to help them recognize violations on construction sites.

Erosion of sediment is a natural process. But when land is disturbed by construction, Nevils explained, accelerated erosion occurs and that becomes a problem.

Sediment washing into streams and waterways covers food sources for fish and spawning beds. It can also make streams more vulnerable to flooding, as sediment fills space where water would be, and increases the cost of treating water for drinking.

Naujoks hopes to get 30 to 50 North Raleigh citizens involved in the Upper Neuse pilot project. He modeled the program on a similar project in Georgia, and eventually hopes to expand it statewide.

"North Raleigh is where a lot of the growth is in the area," Naujoks said. "They're building homes like crazy.

"We really want citizens in North Raleigh to get involved."

Seven North Carolina riverkeepers and representatives from the state Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Southern Environmental Law Center and the Waterkeeper Alliance met on Sept. 14 and received the first draft of the training manual. On Saturday some of them went to see erosion and sedimentation control devices in use at construction sites in Wake Forest.

Holly Spring, assistant engineer for the town of Wake Forest, showed them around. Spring oversees the inspectors in charge of construction sites for the town.

At an industrial park, 2 inches of rain the night before provided a good chance to observe how well the erosion-control measures had worked. Most of the apparatuses did their job. But an incorrectly placed drainage ditch ran into the final cell of a sediment basin -- a cell that normally collects water that has gone through sediment filtration -- and discharged out a pipe that sputtered orange, sediment-laden water.

Spring is glad to see a group like Muddy Water Watch forming. She says on weekends or after big rains, it is hard for inspectors to get out to all the sites.

"The more eyes out there, the better off we all are," she said.

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WHAT WILL MUDDY WATER WATCH MONITORS DO?

1. VISIT THE SITE.

Find the source of the runoff. Do not trespass on private property, but try to observe the site from all sides; observe condition of current erosion and sediment control measures; fill out site report card and journal; take photos.

2. CONTACT LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAM.

Contact Erosion and Sediment program or DENR. Collect information and photos gathered from sites into e-mail or a letter to relay to inspectors.

3. FOLLOW UP.

Continue monitoring the site and recording data. If the problem is not resolved in a week, contact your local contact your local Riverkeeper.

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If you're interested in becoming part of Muddy Water Watch, visit www.neuseriverkeepers.org or call 856-1180.

Dean Naujoks, the Upper Neuse riverkeeper, says sediment has destroyed aquatic habitat and degraded streams.

News & Observer File Photo

Photo by Laura Smith