



Preserve Rural Orange.org

POST OFFICE BOX 1314 CARRBORO, NC 27510

(919) 801-7294

News Update--January 23, 2010

UNC Research Facility Wastewater Spill in Collins Creek

Over the past week we have learned increasingly alarming details about animal wastewater spilling into Collins Creek from a 1.6 million gallon storage lagoon at the UNC Research Resource Facility in Bingham Township. Despite community members' requests over the past several years for meetings, public records and proactive communication about facility safety and expansion plans, UNC representatives have responded with delayed communications, misrepresentations and only partial information long after incidents occurred.

Since October 2009, equipment at the facility has repeatedly failed: there was an incinerator fire and malfunction, an ongoing animal wastewater lagoon liner leak reported in December that spilled into Collins Creek in unknown volumes, a 630-gallon wastewater leak in November from pipes that were never bolted together, and a leak last week due to cracked valves.

We are concerned about UNC's lack of transparency and accountability, delay in reporting an illegal discharge to state authorities, failure to alert neighbors who have repeatedly expressed concern precisely about these hazards, and construction and use of faulty equipment without a permit. These actions endanger public health and the watershed, and result in costly repairs.

Earlier this week Preserve Rural Orange sent a Proposal to UNC administrators, with copies to Orange County commissioners and staff, outlining a series of steps to improve communications, transparency and protection of environmental and human health with regard to current operations and the \$27 million expansion underway at the site.

This week the animal wastewater system was shut down to drain about 400,000 gallons from the lagoon and haul it offsite to OWASA, in order to find and repair the liner leak. UNC will pay OWASA more than \$2,000 for handling the wastewater, and according to NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) estimates, hauling more than fifty truckloads of wastewater could cost UNC up to \$30,000.

News of the incident has been confusing and slow in coming. In UNC documents submitted to DENR this week, wastewater discharge and other evidence of a liner leak was observed and discussed in UNC's correspondence with consultants at least five times beginning on October 19, 2009, yet **UNC withheld this information from DENR officials and the public for more than seven weeks** before conducting a tracer dye test on December 7th and then reporting the leak to DENR on December 11th. Documents describe the lagoon level dropping and wastewater discharging on November 3rd at 1.5 gallons per minute. **That translates into a discharge of 2,160 gallons per day, and 120,960 gallons over eight weeks.**

(continued on next page)

We only learned last week about the illegal discharge into Collins Creek while reviewing DENR documents. UNC staff don't know when the leak began, and we don't know how much wastewater was released into the creek over eight weeks or possibly longer. Equally troubling, even as we asked for information about environmental impacts, we were never informed by UNC that wastewater was spilling into the creek. At our December 14, 2009 meeting, UNC administrators assured neighbors, county staff and the media that leaking wastewater did not reach Collins Creek. Earlier that day, DENR investigators visited the facility, followed the path of dyed wastewater and showed UNC Environmental Health and Safety staff exactly where animal wastewater was flowing into Collins Creek (see photos). **UNC representatives told us the leak was discovered only days before, but UNC documents show that consultants ordered tracer dye to identify the leak in November.** It wasn't until December 15th that UNC began pumping the discharge back into the lagoon.

The animal wastewater system at the the UNC research facility operates without a permit under “deemed permitted” status, an arrangement offering very little oversight that was approved by a previous DENR supervisor. The UNC wastewater system was poorly constructed, but because there was no permit it was not required to be certified by an engineer after construction. With “deemed permitted” status UNC can modify the system’s design, use materials other than those specified in the original design and repair the system as it wishes, all without notifying DENR. We are urging DENR officials to revoke this status and require the university to apply for a permit.

Without a permit, more stringent oversight and county and community involvement, UNC research facility operations and malfunctions will continue with little or no public knowledge of adverse impacts on local and regional drinking water and air quality, human health and the environment. Preserve Rural Orange will continue to seek accurate and timely information from university officials and raise awareness about the need for a public process to protect the community and ensure more sustainable stewardship of the watershed in Orange County.

What you can do:

Please join us in contacting UNC-CH Chancellor Holden Thorp and state legislators, asking university leaders to engage in the public process suggested in our Proposal to UNC, and to take the following additional measures:

- 1. Cease animal wastewater lagoon operations at the UNC Research Resource Facility until DENR concludes its investigation of the illegal discharge into Collins Creek, determines the system’s compliance and permit status, and confirms the safety of continued use**
- 2. Apply for a permit for the animal wastewater treatment and disposal system to ensure oversight and safeguards at the facility**
- 3. Provide neighbors, PRO and county officials with timely copies of communications and reports about this and future incidents**

Chancellor Holden Thorp 103 South Building, Campus Box 9100, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-9100
holden_thorp@unc.edu (919) 962-1365

NC Legislators:

Senator Ellie Kinnaird	Elliek@ncleg.net	(919) 733-5804
Speaker Joe Hackney	Joeh@ncleg.net	(919) 733-3451
Representative Verla Insko	Verlai@ncleg.net	(919) 733-7208
Representative Bill Faison	Billf@ncleg.net	(919) 715-3019