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EARTH DAY ACTIVITIES

We are excited to get out in person again to say hello and share all about the important environmental issues impacting our communities here in NC. Since April 22, 1970, millions of people throughout the US have participated in the annual day of awareness and volunteerism with Mother Earth as the star. It expanded through the decades into a worldwide phenomenon. This year, the theme is “Invest in Our Planet” to “act (boldly), innovate (broadly), and implement (equitably).”

Join us at the following Earth Day events:

North Carolina Museum of Art
Film Screening: Hidden Rivers
Fri. April 22nd, 7 pm – 10 pm

Piedmont Earth Day
Piedmont Environmental Alliance
Sat. April 23rd, 10 am – 4 pm

For event details, and to volunteer, visit
cwfnc.org/earthday2022

MAKING THE INVISIBLE, VISIBLE ON WORLD WATER DAY 2022

We may not be able to see it, hear it, or feel it, but groundwater is one of the most valuable resources our planet has to offer. This invisible treasure is a lifeline for millions of people across the globe who rely on it to sustain drinking water supplies, sanitation systems, farming, and ecosystems.

Human activities and over-use by industries continue to threaten this precious resource at a time when sustainable groundwater management should be a priority for adapting to the climate crisis.

World Water Day was on March 22nd, and this year’s theme acknowledges the importance of groundwater and the work that needs to be done to protect it.

Protecting NC’s groundwater resources is a focal point across our program work. Almost 3 million North Carolinians use unregulated private wells to access drinking water, especially in our most rural and low-income regions. By providing educational materials, policy recommendations, and testing resources for low-income individuals, our team is dedicated to safeguarding this community lifeline and “Making the Invisible Visible” year-round.

Visit tinyurl.com/well-protection to learn how you can become a groundwater advocate and join our statewide NC Well User Network. Read on to hear more about our Well User Protection activities!

WHO WE ARE

Clean Water for NC is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization with a mission to promote clean, safe water and environments and empowered, just communities for all North Carolinians through organizing, education, advocacy, and technical assistance.

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ABOUT US



VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: LEE BARNES

Lee Barnes is a student at UNC at Chapel Hill who first began volunteering for Clean Water for NC in 2020 to research and write a report about how utilities communicate with their non-English speaking customers, and how to address those gaps.

They found the work meaningful in its potential impact on North Carolinians' equitable access to safe, affordable drinking water. Building upon that knowledge, Lee helped to research our most recent report **A Pandemic's Impact: Utility Disconnections, Evictions and Houselessness**, specifically considering how the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated issues related to water affordability. You can read the reports under the Publications tab of our website.

We thank Lee for their wonderful contributions! If you are interested in volunteering with Clean Water for NC, fill out our volunteer application on our website!



A NEW SPACE FOR COMMUNITY VOICES

As a grassroots Environmental Justice organization, our work is grounded in and informed by community members like you! We continue to explore best practices that will help individuals easily connect with staff members and are excited to announce the launch of our new community input tool: the Clean Water for NC Storybank! This online form creates a unique space for community members to contact the Clean Water for NC team and fully express their environmental concerns and experiences, with the option of doing so anonymously.

You will also have the option to publish your story on our "Community Story Feed"! Publishing your story of an environmental threat – or overcoming one! -- will help us connect you to community members dealing with similar situations, allow us to alert local and state officials to environmental concerns in their neck-of-the-woods, and build a real grassroots movement where community voices are heard.

Check out our Storybank at cwfn.org/storyfount.com. We are also excited to hear any feedback you may have. Special thanks to Dawn Robuck and Rachel Yang of StoryFount for inviting us to help develop this amazing tool for nonprofits!

WATER JUSTICE

OPPORTUNITY FOR NC WATER, SEWER SYSTEMS



Over the next 20 years, NC water and wastewater infrastructure needs are estimated to range from \$17B to \$26B. The State Water Infrastructure Authority's Master Plan outlines where investments need to be made to ensure a viable future for NC's nearly 1,800 public water utilities. Facts, figures, and historical notes culminate to make the following clear: **intentional, forward-thinking investments are key to achieving viable, self-sustaining systems.**

Not surprisingly, many of our state's smaller, more rural towns and municipalities face the greatest challenges when investing in and maintaining their drinking water systems and wastewater facilities. Declining rural populations and the outmigration of businesses reduces a town's ratepayer base. Many small systems - those serving less than 10K customers - were created when there was more public funding available than there is today. And during those formative days, local water boards did not charge high enough rates to set aside for long-term repair and maintenance needs. Utilities facing these and other obstacles are deemed "distressed units", or unable to meet their financial, organizational, and/or operational present and future needs.

The federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provides not only much-needed economic relief for individuals and small business owners, but also throws a lifeline to states struggling to provide necessary funding for public water and sewer infrastructure projects. Of the \$8.6B NC is slated to receive in ARPA funding, the NC General Assembly appropriated \$1.69B directly for drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater projects. \$353M is set aside specifically for "distressed" utilities.

While the ARPA federal assistance is essentially "free money" for NC water and wastewater systems to make needed infrastructure investments, Clean Water for NC staff understands that many small government units may not have the staffing or technical capacity needed to navigate the Division of Water Infrastructure's (DWI) application process. We've been contacting "distressed" systems and notifying them of **1) the available funds; 2) application process and deadline; and 3) available application trainings and opportunities to work one-on-one with the DWI.** Our conversations with town officials focus on this once-in-a-generation opportunity to fund infrastructure projects that improve environmental quality and public health and build resilient physical infrastructure.

PARTNERSHIP WITH UNC CHAPEL HILL!

Clean Water for NC has partnered with UNC-Chapel Hill's Superfund Research Program to develop a K12 project in Union County that promotes environmental health literacy in the classroom. By collaborating with teachers to implement relevant curriculum and focusing on schools in areas that are under-resourced, we hope to engage students and their families with issues related to potential toxic metals contamination of their private drinking wells and develop locally practical solutions.

Outside of the classroom, our partnership with UNC has led us to develop some key well user protection policy recommendations that we hope to build upon and introduce to a few "environmental health champions" in the legislature! Check out our newest report to learn more about our policy proposals for increasing funding and accessibility opportunities for folks to test their wells: cwfn.org/wells-policy.



WELL WATER QUALITY IN EASTERN NC

Much of eastern NC faces a myriad of groundwater quality threats. For one, animal agriculture is a dominant activity in this part of the state. Hog farms are abundant, and more recently, poultry farms have taken over the area. In Robeson County, chickens and turkeys have grown by 80%, approximately 24 million birds, since 2012. A major problem for these farms is the disposal of their waste products which can run off and leach into groundwater. The increased concentration of nitrates in drinking water can lead to Blue Baby Syndrome, a potential life-threatening condition. Beyond farming, PFAS (aka perfluorinated or polyfluoroalkyl compounds) are a growing concern for the Jacob Branch tributary of the Lumber River. Recent testing near Active Energy Renewable Power revealed the threat of PFAS discharges into the river, which could impact the drinking water supply for Robeson County residents.

While the water quality of public systems is regulated, protections for private well users remain limited. Our Well User Protection program helps educate private well users on just some protective measures they can take: if you have a well, be proactive and test regularly! Check out testing, treatment, and policy resources on our website: tinyurl.com/well-user-protection.

ROBESON COUNTY



A STORY OF BEAUTY AND PARADOX

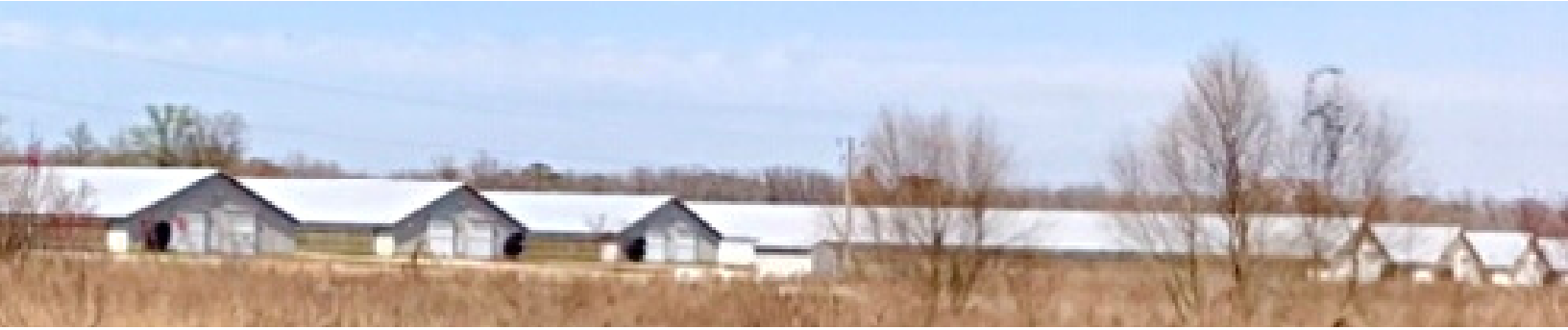
Recently, our Polluter Accountability team set out from the NC mountains to visit the eastern communities of Robeson County. Some of the most striking features of this land are the water and the trees. Bridges pass over forest swamps with peaceful black rivers that made me wish we were traveling by kayak. Beautiful forests serve as air filters and flood defense but are fragmented by vast swaths of clearcuts with downed trees scattered across muddy fields.

We arrived at the bustling UNC Pembroke campus to meet our host **Jeff Currie, the Lumber Riverkeeper**. Jeff began his story of Robeson by explaining the long history of racial segregation - not just bi-racial, but tri-racial. He tells us there used to be three sets of water fountains here, "White", "Colored", and "Indian." The Indigenous community makes up over 40% of the population in Robeson County, mostly Lumbee, with Black and White populations around 24% each, and the remaining 10% Hispanic/Latinx. But in fenceline communities located near polluting facilities in Robeson, the percentages are much higher for BIPOC and low-income communities. None of this was apparent from a visitor's perspective in a place that seemed to take such pride in their Indigenous heritage, which was quite visible in signs, beautiful art, and a large bulletin announcing an upcoming PowWow.

The purpose of this trip was to work in the Robeson community more directly through environmental monitoring and site visits to polluting facilities. Out of concern for local air quality, we arranged through our partners at Clean AIRE NC to secure **three Purple Air Monitors** for Robeson County that would collect 24/7 data on particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10).

We visited Active Energy Renewable Power (AERP), a manufacturer of black wood pellets,





an unproven technology with worrisome air impacts. We were struck by the colorful community playground across the street from such a facility. We visited the site of NC Renewable Power (NCRP), a company who repeatedly violated the Clean Air Act, yet may also soon be granted a major air permit. Hearings for both of these facilities were met with significant community opposition, with more than 90% of comments opposed. The public expressed concerns about the injustice of the impacts to BIPOC communities, but NC Div of Air Quality made it clear that only technical comments pertaining directly to the permit would be recorded for public record.

Our tour continued past fields that hid liquefied natural gas pipelines located unnervingly close to an elementary school (see LNG article). We passed numerous factories, from fabrics manufacturers to medical supplies to Campbell Soup, but one of the biggest was a poultry processing plant called Mountaire. It turned out that this plant is supported by the company's other operations: a **48-barn mega poultry CAFO** and many smaller industrial animal farms scattered throughout the region. When I asked Jeff of all the polluting industries in Robeson, which one keeps him up most at night, he replied "Mountaire" without hesitation. Even in the rain, we witnessed Mountaire releasing wastewater from the plant on nearby fields. And the sheer size and smell of a neighborhood of chicken houses, was probably the most staggering experience of the trip.

Robeson County is a place of contrast and paradox; beautiful dark waters that hide wastewater discharge, protective forests that have been clearcut, and a proud community haunted by racial injustice that continues to this day through the system of permits for polluting industries. But Jeff's introduction to Robeson is only the beginning of the story. Behind the scenes the community is active, strong, and organizing - collecting ideas and strategizing about how to fight for clean air and water in this rich and beautiful place. We stand ready to support their efforts.

MAXTON LNG FACILITY AND PIPELINES

In the summer of 2021, Piedmont Natural Gas (PNG) formally opened its liquefied natural gas (LNG) processing plant and storage facility in Maxton, Robeson County – constructed to serve the plant with 70 ft easements. LNG facilities are used during peak times to address fluctuating demands on gas pipelines and the plant processes toxic materials from gas, storing it on site. While the facility initially applied for an air quality permit, **PNG was not required to complete the application process** and there was no opportunity for public comment despite clear community concern.

Winyah Rivers Alliance and Friends of the Earth filed an intent to sue for violations of the Clean Water Act and failure to adequately assess impacts of the development on the area known as the "Long Swamp." Significant archaeological sites would be disturbed in this area and could worsen known flooding problems by clearing forested wetlands. Additional concerns about the plant and connecting pipelines include the cumulative impacts on residents, with the area having an 87% Indigenous population and high rates of poverty in a county already overburdened with industry.

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC, MEANINGFULLY

For years, NC communities have spoken out about the limited opportunities to participate in state government decision-making such as policy and permitting, particularly historically marginalized and underserved communities. DEQ responded with a **Public Participation Plan** in February 2020, including provisions for Title VI civil rights matters and limited English proficiency. While we appreciate and recognize this effort, there are still shortfalls and we continually engage DEQ on ways to increase meaningful public participation as part of our Community Empowerment program.

Additionally, Clean Water for NC has been working in a coalition pushing for policy changes to increase meaningful public participation and require weighted consideration of EJ and cumulative impacts. Governor Cooper responded to our collective calls with his January 2022 **Executive Order 246 on Climate and Equity**. In March, we responded to the Governor's **NC Access Survey** and met with his consultants about community concerns and our recommendations. We also submitted comments to the **Andrea Harris Taskforce** and the **DEQ Secretary's EJ and Equity Advisory Board**.

We will continue to push for and engage with our government officials to ensure that clean, safe water for all starts with transparency, realized engagement, and correcting power dynamics so that people, not just industry, can be heard.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT



A PROGRESSING DEQ COMMUNITY MAPPING TOOL

In our last edition of Clean Currents, we discussed NC Dept of Environmental Quality's (DEQ) Community Mapping System, developed as part of a Title VI settlement agreement, and some of its shortfalls. Based on community feedback, the mapping system is on its second version, Version 1.0 after its beta release, which includes some updates and improvements. A contact form is still available to connect with DEQ on their [website](#). Community engagement is crucial to the further development of this mapping system, and Clean Water for NC hopes to see it improve in the future with added features such as uploading your own map data and an improved Environmental Justice (EJ) dashboard.

As it currently functions, the Community Mapping System has a variety of features that can help you better understand what facilities, pollution sources, and information is available within an area. The **"Facility, Permit, and Incident Layers"** list is one of the most helpful, as it includes several map layers, such as air quality permit sites, animal feeding operations, coal ash structural fills, hazardous waste sites, underground storage tank incidents, and more. You can click on many individual facilities to access their permit files and ownership information. Another list, **"Environmental Layers,"** provides three options for selection, including DEQ's selection of "Potentially Underserved Block Groups" from 2019, conservation areas, and flood zones in the state. If you click on a census block, the **EJ Tool** will open, which provides information on the area's facilities, and sensitive receptors (like nursing homes or schools), and demographics in comparison to the state. The tool also provides health information, such as heart disease deaths, birth rates, and asthma.

To learn more about how to use DEQ's Community Mapping System, you can watch our tutorial videos. Part 1 is an overview of the main mapping system, its layers, and reporting features. Part 2 illustrates how to access and use the map's EJ Tool. To watch the first video, go to tinyurl.com/ncdeq-mapping, or scan the QR code! And for more information on our Community Tools campaign, with other helpful online mapping systems and resources, check out cwfn.org/tools.



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LET'S CREATE SOMETHING WONDERFUL TOGETHER!

Clean Water for NC is revamping our Community Toolkit to provide resources YOU can take to your communities and be an advocate for your neighborhood, regardless of time, funding, or knowledge restrictions. Part of this process involves your much-needed guidance. Let us **HEAR YOUR VOICE**. Share your needs, wants, and preferences by responding to our Community Toolkit Survey TODAY at tinyurl.com/communitytoolkitsurvey!



Everyone who submits a survey will be entered into a drawing for a **\$25 Visa Gift Card**.

We will also be holding Listening Sessions in May and June. Stay tuned for more information by signing up to our [email list](#).

