

Etowah River is not in peachy shape

By JOE COOK, Guest Columnist

BASED ON R. Harold Brown's Aug. 13 column "Etowah River doing just fine, thank you," it is clear he has spent too much time cooped up in the Georgia Public Policy Foundation (GPPF) think-tank and hasn't spent enough time on our rivers and streams.

The column by Brown, University of Georgia emeritus professor and author of "The Greening of Georgia," left the impression, to the uninformed reader that our state, and metro Atlanta in particular, has solved its water pollution problems and that urban development has no impact on our streams and rivers. It makes me wonder just how "independent" GPPF really is.

The conclusions that he draws from selected facts distorts the truth and is a slap in the face to all of us who are working to protect our drinking water sources and ensure enough clean water for this and future generations.

At the Coosa River Basin Initiative, we're out on our rivers and streams weekly, testing the water, responding to citizen complaints and tracking down polluters.

If you'd like to see the impacts of urbanization, visit the Etowah Indian Mounds site in Cartersville where you can see Pumpkinvine Creek spewing its bright red load of sediment into the Etowah. Pumpkinvine drains Paulding County — one of the country's fastest-growing counties.

Or visit Long Swamp Creek in Cherokee County after a heavy rain. Bacteria counts on that Etowah tributary were 50 times the state's safe level after a recent summer downpour.

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OR LOOK, as Brown failed to do, at Georgia Environmental Protection Division's (EPD) updated list of polluted water bodies released earlier this year. Based on studies conducted from 2001-05, EPD added to this list 9,125 acres of Lake Allatoona due to high chlorophyll levels. Chlorophyll is an indicator of high nutrient levels — likely a result of runoff from the increasingly urbanized landscape upstream from the lake.

Brown's conclusions that water quality in the Etowah and Lake Allatoona has improved are based on five-year-old data.

On other fronts, he also misleads.

True, fish consumption warnings for Allatoona due to PCB-contamination have been removed, but the warnings remain in place for the Etowah River below Allatoona and most other streams in the Coosa River Basin. With serious health issues at stake, it is irresponsible to toss out such facts without giving the full story.

True, phosphorus levels — a nutrient that leads to algal blooms and low oxygen levels — have, in fact, declined in the Etowah and Allatoona, as Brown asserts. But he fails to note that this reduction is a result of a 1990 state ban on phosphorus in detergents and stronger government-imposed restrictions on wastewater treatment facilities.

Interestingly, in its mission statement GPPF claims that "the solutions to most problems lie in a strong private sector, not in a big government bureaucracy." Without big government intervention in 1990, phosphorus levels in Lake Allatoona today could, indeed, be catastrophic.

FINALLY, BROWN'S assertion that urban development has no impact on water quality in streams is a gross distortion of facts. In citing sediment studies on Gwinnett County streams, Brown claims that sediment concentrations in recently urbanized streams have not changed since 1996, but he fails to note data that shows the consistent and exceedingly high levels of sediment in these streams which suggest that urbanization has fouled these streams.

In the Etowah River Basin, data that CRBI and the U.S. Geological Survey have collected over the past few years shows turbidity (sediment) readings steadily increasing, especially after heavy rains. The primary cause is dirt washing off land cleared for development.

And, that's bad news for fish and people. Fish die and people pay the price in increased water treatment costs.

Brown's head-in-the-sand assertions notwithstanding, as our region's population grows and as more land is converted to pavements, parking lots and roofs, our rivers and streams will become polluted unless we are vigilant.

We need strong water quality laws and we need strong enforcement of these laws. We don't need public-policy think tanks distorting the facts to further the agenda of those who would profit by destroying our streams and rivers.

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