

## U.S. agency: Stop super sewer

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife has called for a suspension of Jefferson County's permit to build its Cahaba River super sewer, saying it is likely to violate the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

In a March 5 letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a Fish and Wildlife biologist writes that endangered species in the river already have been severely affected by both sewage and construction.

Thursday, Birmingham lawyer Ned Mudd filed a 60-day notice of intent to sue the Corps for failing to consult with Fish and Wildlife before granting Jefferson County a permit for the project.

"They were supposed to do this consultation before the project and, as you know, the super sewer is well under way," Mudd said. "That is a violation right there."

The Fish and Wildlife Service said the Corps should study the project's effects on endangered species before allowing it to proceed.

Efforts to reach representatives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers were unsuccessful Thursday.

The 17-mile-long, 12-foot-wide sewer tunnel would allow the county to extend sewer service along the Interstate 459 corridor as far as Grants Mill Road, serving new developments and those that are now on septic systems.

The line is about half complete, and the county has committed about \$61 million to the project. It is ultimately expected to cost at least \$141 million.

County officials say the sewer tunnel carrying a 7-foot wide trunk line would be better for the river than allowing development throughout the Cahaba basin to depend on a mish-mash of septic systems, shallow lines and sewer tie-ons.

"This is going to protect the environment far and away better than anything else that could be put out there," said Jack Swann, Jefferson County's director of environmental services.

However, the super sewer ultimately will carry as much as 17.9 million gallons of treated sewage into the Cahaba, county officials say. That would roughly triple the average 8.9 million gallons of wastewater that now enter the river each day.

Already, the sewage wastewater in the river has harmed endangered darters, snails, mussels and shiners in the Cahaba River, according to Fish and Wildlife's Alabama office.

"The river is greatly impacted by wastewater from sewage plants," biologist Carl Couret wrote in a separate letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, also on March 5.

**Endangered species**

The river is listed as impaired under the U.S. Clean Water Act for excess nutrients, pathogens, silt and habitat alteration, he continued.

"The biological integrity of the river should be considered compromised," Couret wrote.

Federal documents listing endangered species in the Cahaba place part of the blame on wastewater treatment plants, said Randy Haddock, field biologist for the Cahaba River Society.

Treated wastewater adds nutrients to the river that can cause excessive algae growth and wide swings in oxygen levels, stressing sensitive animals.

"In addition to that, there's a habitat quality problem that excessive nutrients cause," Haddock said. "Excessive algae growth can smother habitat, actually cover it up and make it unavailable."

Swann said the trunk line would not add more pollution to the river because treatment would improve as capacity increases. He said the line is not expected to use its full capacity for several decades, when treatment will be better still.

Fish and Wildlife also questioned the impact of tunneling under the river. The county's current plans show the line crossing under the river 15 times.

"The tunneling process could result in fractures in the bedrock causing the river to drain into an underlying aquifer," Couret wrote to the EPA.

Swann said the tunnel would run at least 10 feet under the river bed, in solid rock.

Mudd, who is represented by the Montgomery firm WildLaw, also accuses the Corps of violating the U.S. Clean Water Act in issuing the permit for the sewer tunnel.