

Bluffton campaign targets pet waste, improved May River

By ALLISON STICE astice@islandpacket.com 843-706-8138

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A social marketing campaign to get Bluffton area dog owners to pick up after their pets -- and help decrease a source of pollution in the May River -- will debut in July.

Called "Neighbors for Clean Water: Our Rivers, Our Responsibility," the campaign's logo, slogan and materials were developed over several months by a town-hired consultant.

With help from focus groups and a steering committee, the Virginia-based company Water Words That Work LLC is finalizing print advertisements, radio spots, mailings and a website. The campaign will also premiere on Facebook and Twitter.

Town of Bluffton staff helped provide the local perspective and arranged a focus group where six residents were paid \$30 each for their thoughts, natural resources manager Kim Jones said.

Jones said the focus group revealed pet owners -- even those who lived on the waterfront -- didn't think dog poop was a significant source of high fecal coliform levels that have shut down shellfish harvesting in portions of the May.

"That was really eye-opening," Jones said.

Staff has estimated if a quarter of the owners of the 3,200 dogs in town don't pick up after their pets, 290,000 pounds of pet waste could make its way to the river each year.

For the whole watershed, that estimate grows to 110 tons, Jones said.

Staff crunched similar numbers to see how horse manure might be contributing to river pollution but after further study found that equestrian centers at Rose Dhu and Palmetto Bluff had effective manure management plans, Jones said.

During the campaign, residents will be asked to sign a pledge to always scoop after their dogs in public places and to do the same once a week in their yards. Those who sign will be entered into a lottery to win five Doggie Dooley pet septic systems and free installation, Jones said.

The target audience for the marketing efforts is about 1,500 people. A separate campaign to educate septic tank owners is aimed at more than 300 residents and will begin in August, Jones said.

Water Words That Work LLC has a \$40,000 contract paid for with a portion of a S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control grant. The \$1 million grant funds a variety of river-cleanup projects and requires an educational component to teach residents do their part.

To supplement the campaigns, the grant has funded installations of pet-waste stations. The town also has a program offering free septic-tank repairs and pumpouts for residents who qualify.

The grant requires tracking results of the marketing campaign to see how attitudes have changed. Those results will be evaluated in the fall.

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