

CONTACT:

Nelson Brooke

Black Warrior Riverkeeper

(205) 458-0095

nbrooke@blackwarriorriver.org



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Umicore Pollutes Jasper & Birmingham's Drinking Water

Arab, AL. A chemical industry in Arab, AL has been discharging large volumes of bromide into the Riley Maze Wastewater Treatment Plant for years. The Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) oversees the plant's daily discharge to Riley Maze Creek and administers the permit. This plant is allowed to receive pretreated wastewater from Umicore Specialty Chemicals through ADEM's indirect discharge permit system.

Bromide is apparently not considered a pollutant by ADEM, as they have allowed Umicore to discharge it untreated to the wastewater plant, which discharges it untreated into Riley Maze Creek. This creek is on the state's 303(d) List of impaired waterways due to excessive siltation and toxicity from the wastewater plant. Riley Maze Creek is a tributary to Tibb Creek, also impaired by the wastewater plant's discharge. A total of nine stream miles are impaired. ADEM has known of these impairments since 1998.

Black Warrior Riverkeeper began investigating this plant in 2005 and initiated cleanup of its faulty operations by issuing a 60-day Notice of Intent to sue on October 26, 2006. ADEM pre-empted us by taking the case and we have been submitting comments on their draft Consent Order. During this commenting process Riverkeeper exposed an issue that ADEM had wholly overlooked in its Order: toxicity failures at the plant. When a plant fails toxicity tests that means its discharge is a threat to the well-being of aquatic life in the receiving waters. Our findings resulted in substantial changes in the draft Order, including stricter penalties.

During this same time period Riverkeeper learned that the City of Jasper and the City of Birmingham were both having problems with their drinking water supply from the Mulberry Fork. Riley Maze Creek & Tibb Creek are tributaries of the Mulberry Fork. Umicore's unregulated discharge of bromide is compromising two cities' drinking water. You would think that ADEM would have immediately halted all discharges of bromide to the river. Nope! The Birmingham Water Works Board had to discontinue use of the Mulberry Fork water supply until they were sure that bromide was no longer compromising operations. In order to halt the pollution the BWWB had to sue Umicore after failed negotiations. A judge has called for the majority of the bromide to be alternately discharged into a wastewater plant in the Tennessee River basin.

Why is bromide threatening our water supply? Amazingly, Umicore was discharging so much into the Mulberry Fork's tributaries that Birmingham's water intake some 92 miles downstream was affected. When bromide comes into contact with chlorine, a commonly used disinfectant for drinking water supplies, it forms disinfectant byproducts known as trihalogenated methanes. Disinfectant byproducts are known to pose a cancer risk to humans. For more information on this subject, see the following link from the Journal of Young Investigators: <http://www.jyi.org/volumes/volume5/issue4/features/vora.html>

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Founded in 2001 by David Whiteside, Black Warrior Riverkeeper is a citizen-based, non-profit organization working to protect and restore the Black Warrior River and its tributaries in order to ensure clean water, a healthy aquatic environment, and the recreational and aesthetic values of the river. Riverkeeper works to protect our water resources by monitoring the watershed, educating the public, and holding major polluters accountable for their violations. Black Warrior Riverkeeper is a proud member of Waterkeeper Alliance.

Nelson Brooke – Riverkeeper

Black Warrior RIVERKEEPER

712 37th Street South

Birmingham, AL 35222

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www.BlackWarriorRiver.org