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Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Bill Would Allow Treated Sewage in Groundwater

OCEAN, N.C.--A bill in the N. C. House would allow treated sewage to be pumped into North Carolina's aquifers, overturning a longstanding law protecting vital drinking-water sources and potentially posing a significant health risk to the millions of North Carolinians who depend on clean groundwater for use in their homes and businesses.

"Pumping sewage underground is a risky scheme that can easily contaminate our groundwater," said Tess Sanders, White Oak-New Riverkeeper®. "North Carolina's citizens have a right to clean and safe drinking water."

Because of the risks, injecting treated sewage into groundwater is currently illegal in North Carolina. But Rep. Russell Tucker (D-Duplin) introduced House Bill H643, which would allow operators of sewer systems to apply for permits to inject treated sewage – called "reclaimed water" in the bill -- into aquifers for "temporary" storage. Onslow Water and Sewer Authority (ONWASA) proposed the bill and hired an expensive lobbyist, Sandy Sands, to push its passage. The bill is awaiting a hearing before the House Committee on Water Resources and Infrastructure.

As population growth continues to deplete groundwater sources throughout the country, injecting treated surface water or drinking water into the ground to recharge aquifers is becoming more common. At least 48 states, however, ban or discourage using treated sewage for that purpose.

"There's a good reason for that," noted Frank Tursi, the Cape Lookout Coastkeeper® for the N.C. Coastal Federation. "Back in the old days every farmer in North Carolina knew not to put the outhouse over the well. It still seems like a simple rule worth following."

Even injecting treated surface water or drinking water into the ground to recharge aquifers has its risks:

- The National Research Council, part of the National Academies of Science, found in 2001 that using chemically treated surface water posed a significant risk to groundwater quality. The report noted that treated water could still contain a higher concentration of bacteria and contaminants than the native groundwater. The study also found an increase of heavy metal concentrations, including mercury.
- The Army Corps of Engineers found arsenic levels exceeding safe drinking water standards in areas where surface water or drinking water was injected into the ground.
- The U.S. Geological Survey found that less than 25 percent of injected water would be available for reuse after studying a proposed project in South Carolina, suggesting that pumping treated wastewater into an aquifer may risk contaminating drinking water for very little potential recovery.

Many of the injection wells in other states like Hawaii and Florida have not performed as designed, leading to such disasters as clogged aquifers, noted Mike Sandeford of the New River Foundation, a conservation group in Onslow County. "Aquifer clogging will lead to well failures which result in public health, legal and financial problems," he said. "The damage to the water quality of our aquifers would be impossible to correct on a human time scale and will ultimately threaten North Carolina's economy and environment."

If the groundwater is contaminated, there is currently no law in North Carolina that requires nearby private well users to be notified, a loophole that activists like Hope Taylor of Clean Water for N.C. have been working for years to close. "This whole idea of pumping treated sewage into the ground simply isn't consistent with federal requirements—in fact, it would specifically facilitate degradation of our groundwater," she said. "Even the best wastewater plants have treatment failures, and once it's in the aquifer, there's no getting it back out."

State agencies recently permitted two N.C. cities, Greenville and Wilmington, to pump treated drinking water into the ground to recharge aquifers. "I would like to see how those projects develop before we allow the pumping of wastewater," stated Sanders.

"The legislature should heed the caution expressed by scientific experts," Tursi said. "This is a flawed bill that needs to die. If the legislature wants to embark down this treacherous path, it owes it to the people of the state to first do some due diligence."

He suggested that the legislature assign a study committee the task of investigating potential benefits and risks and make recommendations to the next legislature. A bill to create such a committee was considered by the legislature in 2007 but never passed.

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The North Carolina Coastal Federation (NCCF) is the state's only non-profit organization focused exclusively on protecting and restoring the coast of North Carolina through education, advocacy and habitat restoration and preservation. NCCF headquarters are located at 3609 Highway 24 in Ocean between Morehead City and Swansboro and are open Monday through Friday from 8:30 am to 5 pm.

The mission of the White Oak-New Riverkeeper Alliance to restore and protect the White Oak and New Rivers through strong advocacy, enforcement of environmental laws, public education and promotion of citizen ownership and responsibility in the care of these rivers.