

Environmental group files motion against city

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An environmental group based in New Orleans has filed a motion for summary judgment in federal court, asking that the City of Hattiesburg be found to have violated its sewage discharge permit for nearly the past 14 years.

Andrew Whitehurst, water policy director for the Gulf Restoration Network, said the motion asked that city be held liable under the Clean Water Act for discharging “poorly treated sewage” into the Leaf and Bouie rivers.

“It’s a public health issue,” Whitehurst said.

The motion was filed Jan. 7 in the Southern District of Mississippi, two days before the city entered into a 30-year contract with a Pine Belt-based company to take over the dispersal of treated wastewater.

The agreement with Groundworx LLC would modify Hattiesburg’s sewage lagoons and stop the discharge of wastewater into the Leaf River. Instead, partially treated wastewater would be piped and sprayed over about 10,000 acres of land in Forrest and Lamar counties.

“This was something that we were going to have to do anyway because the regulations are changing, what we can put in the river, the limits are changing,” City Council President Kim Bradley said after the council voted 4-1 to approve the partnership with Groundworx.

“We’re not going to do the conventional, cookie-cutter way like everybody else, treat it up and dump it in the river. We’re going to take it and create a really unique irrigation system. We’re going to grow trees, and we’re going to grow grass, and we’re going to do the green thing.”

Whitehurst said that was the point of GRN’s original suit filed in March 2012.

“It’s about enforcing the laws and protecting the public,” Whitehurst said. “They needed to make improvements in that (sewage) system and it needed to be pushed forward.”

The motion for summary judgment asks that Federal District Judge Kenneth Starrett to find the city liable for 5,464 days in violation of the permissible levels of sewage allowed in the discharge permits.

In a release announcing the filing, GRN said evidence supporting the violations could be found in the city’s own Discharge Monitoring Reports, certified documents that must be sent each month to the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality. GRN collected a series of those reports by searching MDEQ files from 2006 to 2013.