

Restoration Work Still to Be Completed After Alafia River Acid Spill

The 1997 spill from a fertilizer plant damaged 377 acres of riverine habitat.



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MULBERRY | It's been nearly 15 years since 56 million gallons of acidic waste water from the now-defunct Mulberry Phosphates fertilizer plant turned the Alafia River into a killing zone.

Much of the river has recovered naturally, as environmental systems eventually do in response to natural or man-made assaults.

But the \$3.7 million settlement with Mulberry Phosphates' insurance company in 2002 included \$2.4 million to pay for habitat improvement in the freshwater sections of the river to compensate for the damage.

The December 1997 spill damaged 377 acres of riverine habitat and killed or injured any wildlife that couldn't get out of the way quickly enough on Skinned Sapling Creek and the North Prong of the Alafia River on the outskirts of Mulberry.

The North Prong begins near Mulberry and joins the South Prong, which begins near Bradley, to form the main river channel in eastern Hillsborough County. The river flows to Hillsborough Bay in Riverview.

But the planned restoration won't occur in the environmentally damaged land along the river in Polk County. Instead, scientists involved in the restoration planning issued a report in February recommending a restoration project in an environmental preserve about 15 miles southwest of the spill site.

The restoration work will occur in an area known as Stallion Hammock in Hillsborough County's Balm-Boyette Scrub Preserve, a 4,933-acre public preserve and recreation area south of Brandon. Pringle Branch, a tributary of Fishhawk Creek, flows there. Fishhawk Creek is a tributary of the Alafia River.

The proposal involves restoring wetlands in an area that has been impacted by phosphate mining to improve water quality and wildlife habitat.

The 18-page report mentions other projects in the Mulberry area closer to the actual impact of the spill that were considered and rejected.

The report said the five projects were ruled out either because they involved work on private land or because they may not have produced significant environmental improvements or, if they did, would have required long-term monitoring and maintenance.

John Ryan, a Winter Haven environmentalist who was involved in efforts to make sure restoration occurred in upstream areas, said it doesn't bother him that the final restoration plan will occur in another part of the river basin.

"It doesn't make any sense to be parochial," he said, adding that the important thing is that some restoration will occur.

Florida Department of Environmental Protection spokeswoman Ana Gibbs said the report has been forwarded to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for review.

She said there was no time schedule for getting the work done, explaining that even after the plan gets the go-ahead, it will then require engineering plans and construction bids.

That means the work isn't likely to occur until at least next year, she said.

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