



PO Box 16206
Savannah, GA 31416
Phone/Fax: 866-942-6222

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Working Together to Protect the Ogeechee, Canoochee and Coastal Rivers

September 29, 2023

Via E-Mail

Environmental Protection Division
Watershed Protection Branch
Wastewater Regulatory Program
ATTN: August Lutkehus
2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive
Suite 1470A East
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
august.lutkehus@dnr.ga.gov

Re: Comments on City of Pembroke's NPDES Permit No. GA0038377 for the Pembroke Water Pollution Control Plant

Dear Mr. Lutkehus:

Ogeechee Riverkeeper's mission is to protect, preserve, and improve the water quality of the Ogeechee River basin, including the Canoochee River and the coastal and tidal rivers of Liberty, Bryan, and Chatham Counties. ORK works with local communities to share and collect information on the ecological and cultural importance of rivers and streams throughout the Basin, and uses that information to amplify the voices of those who speak for the watershed. One of ORK's primary roles is as watchdog on wastewater management projects throughout the watershed that could pose a significant threat to its water quality and aquatic environments.

ORK offers these comments on the City of Pembroke's draft National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permit for the Pembroke Water Pollution Control Plant (WPCP). Overall, ORK continues to question the need for the Pembroke WPCP's expansion in light of the forthcoming North Bryan Water Reclamation Facility¹ (NBWRF) that will be located a relatively short distance from the City of Pembroke's service area and existing wastewater treatment facilities. In addition to those general concerns, ORK has specific comments and suggestions on the effluent limitation and monitoring proposed for the Pembroke WPCP's operation.

¹ Permit No. GA0050326

I. Wastewater treatment capacity expansion is better met by the North Bryan Water Reclamation Facility

First, ORK wishes to restate our comments from the City of Pembroke's Notice of No Significant Impact related to its ARPA Grant No. GA-0010529. In short, ORK believes that rather than increasing land application and discharge at the City of Pembroke's current WPCP, it should embrace a regional approach to wastewater management and meet its capacity needs through the North Bryan Water Reclamation Facility.

Expanding the land application system (LAS) is more environmentally intensive, requires more land, and would be an unnecessary option to temporary capacity needs. Wastewater treatment through an LAS increases the likelihood of nutrients and other pollutants negatively impacting both terrestrial and aquatic environments and the ecology and species they support. This also extends to human health impacts for recreators who might fish, hunt, or otherwise enjoy these areas. An LAS also requires a large amount of land to spread the resulting wastewater on. Neighboring properties also become less desirable, increasing the amount of lands directly or indirectly impacted by LAS operations. Likewise, the 150,000 MGD LAS expansion noted in earlier planning and submission documents is likely unnecessary in light of the North Bryan Water Reclamation Facility. The LAS's current capacity was stated to be 85% used. This leaves 15% of its capacity to be utilized while the NBWRF is constructed and the City of Pembroke connects into the system. Overall, increasing land application in order to bridge a temporary gap in wastewater treatment capacity should not be pursued.

Further, the City of Pembroke should pursue interconnection of its wastewater treatment system into the regionalizing network not only to meet its project capacity needs but to allow for easier, less expensive, and more environmentally friendly expansion for decades to come. The region around North Bryan County, including but not limited to Bulloch, Chatham, and Effingham counties, is expected to see continuing residential, commercial, and industrial growth. As such, the NBWRF is being built, in part, to meet the increasing wastewater demand that will accompany that growth. The potentially 8.0 MGD of capacity that will be built will likely make the City of Pembroke's expanded capacity - both its LAS expansion and future mechanical treatment facility - redundant and an unnecessary financial expenditure. Early interconnection with the NBWRF will allow Pembroke to utilize significant amounts of capacity to meet current projected needs and easily expand to support future growth, all while avoiding the need for both LAS expansion and additional on-site septic or other wastewater treatment systems.

II. Specific Comments on Effluent Limitations and Conditions

Beyond the questionable need for expansion, ORK offers these comments on the draft permit. Generally, monitoring should be increased and the impacted public should be involved in the future actions contemplated by the permit.

A. Water Quality Protections

Permit terms and conditions should be strengthened to ensure impacted water bodies are not further degraded by the proposed discharge. Mill Creek, which receives the City of Pembroke WPCP discharge, is already water quality limited, as is the Ogeechee River, which eventually receives the Mill Creek water via Black Creek. As such,

additional protections and monitoring are both warranted and necessary to ensure further degradation does not occur from this activity.

Bacterial levels specifically should receive additional monitoring attention. Particularly, the surface water monitoring required by Section 5.3.4 should also include *E. coli* as a parameter to be monitored. Section 4.4 notes that the Georgia Environmental Protection Division does not consider dilution in its analysis due to bacteria's ability to reproduce in the receiving stream. This reproduction ability combined with Mill Creek's already water quality limited status necessitates, at minimum, more careful monitoring. Effluent sampling alone is insufficient to determine the downstream impacts. ORK requests that *E. coli* be added as a parameter monitored under Section 5.3.4.

ORK also wishes to draw attention to pH limitations in the proposed permit. As noted in Section 3.1, Mill Creek's designated uses per GAC 391-3-6.03(6) set a pH range of 6.0-8.5. However, Section 4.4 allows for a daily maximum of up to 9.0. With no additional limitation, such as a monthly average, this permit allows for discharge to be up to 9.0 each day of the month. With effluent monitoring of pH only requiring one sample per month, as per Sections B.1.a, B.1.b, and B.2., and surface water monitoring only required once a quarter, the facility's effluent could potentially cause or contribute to pH standard exceedances. ORK suggests two changes to prevent these exceedances. First, reduce the allowed pH levels in the effluent from 9.0 to 8.5 to match Mill Creek's water quality standard. Second, increase effluent and surface water monitoring frequency to ensure Mill Creek and downstream waters are not impaired.

Surface water monitoring should also be strengthened, generally. First, monitoring should occur more frequently than once per quarter. ORK suggests a monthly surface monitoring requirement for all pollution parameters, including *E. coli*. Second, if monitoring frequency does not change, ORK urges more frequent monitoring following results returning exceedances. Additionally, following exceedance events, EPD should initiate corrective procedures to ensure water quality returns to ranges that support the designated uses.

Finally, to ensure groundwater remains consumable and does not harm neighboring and nearby property owners, ORK urges EPD to increase groundwater monitoring at its monitoring wells. ORK requests that all parameters identified in Section B.2.c be sampled at least once per month. This is especially important for *E. coli*, as its maximum contaminant level is zero positive samples, but sampling is only required twice per year. This leaves long stretches of time where contamination may be occurring and harming human health that goes unnoticed due to infrequent sampling requirements.

B. Public Involvement in Future Actions

Two future activities contemplated by this permit - Mechanical Plant construction and a Watershed Protection Plan - should include public input and feedback. These significant and important components are not detailed in this draft permit and, therefore, cannot be constructively commented on by affected parties and individuals. As such, ORK urges the EPD to incorporate public feedback in these two components.

First, ORK requests that the public be actively involved in the mechanical plant's permitting and construction process. Very little is detailed in Section 6.2 of this draft permit. Prior to any permitting decision or construction activities, ORK requests that EPD communicates with the public, hosts public hearings and, at minimum, opens

comment periods to allow the public to voice their constructive comments and feedback on any new treatment facility. As noted above, ORK does not believe an additional treatment facility is necessary in light of the North Bryan Water Reclamation Facility. It is likely that community members would likewise have concerns they would want addressed prior to permitting and construction.

Second, ORK requests that the public be involved in the creation and approval of the Watershed Protection Plan (WPP) required in this draft permit. Over the three years following the effective date of this permit when the WPP is being created, ORK asks that the permittee be required to periodically inform and seek feedback from the affected public about the status and components of its plan. Ideally, a review committee including members of the public would periodically meet to draft and revise the WPP. At minimum, annual public meetings should be held where the public is given the opportunity to voice their feedback and have their questions considered and answered. Finally, prior to the WPP's submission to EPD for, the permittees should host a final meeting explaining the plan and take feedback from the public. EPD should likewise open the proposed WPP to public comment prior to its final approval and implementation.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration; please let me know if you have any questions: ben@ogeecheeriverkeeper.org or 866-942-6222 x9.

Ben Kirsch, Legal Director
Ogeechee Riverkeeper