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A push for more whitewater

Group seeks return of rapids to S.C. river

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A national paddlers' group wants to turn Great Falls, S.C., into a whitewater paddling destination and asks Duke Power to revive dry Catawba River channels with weekend releases of water.

American Whitewater proposes spilling water into the two channels to create Class II-IV rapids for paddlers. The "Great Falls of the Catawba," a thunderous cataract of rapids, were dewatered in 1907 when Duke erected diversion dams to shunt the river into hydroelectric plants.

The proposal, submitted as part of Duke's relicensing process, requests 28 days of releases a year into the 0.6-mile short channel and 20 days of releases into the 2-mile long channel.

"The Great Falls, once restored, will be the closest whitewater to hundreds of paddlers, if not thousands," noted the proposal written by Kevin Colburn, an American Whitewater staffer, and volunteer Andrew Lazenby of Rock Hill. Great Falls is 55 miles south of Charlotte.

The proposal would apply in 2008 as a condition of Duke Power's receiving a new license for its dams on the Catawba-Wateree rivers. Last fall, Duke Power proposed scheduled releases at Great Falls for six days a year plus an unspecified continuous, minimum flow.

"It's a starting point," Lazenby said. "We definitely want more than that."

The utility has offered to lease Mountain Island and adjacent Dearborn Island to South Carolina for parks.

The utility, through a private contractor, conducted flow tests in October, allowing canoeists and kayaks to paddle both the channels around Mountain Island, upstream of Dearborn Island, at three increasingly higher volumes of water. Paddlers rated the rapids at the long channel at Class I-II; the short channel at Class III-IV.

Duke Power spokesman Rick Rhodes said the American Whitewater proposal was passed along to a stakeholders' committee assessing recreation possibilities. "We certainly thought it had merit," Rhodes said.

The American Whitewater and Duke Power proposals are considered "trial balloons and a work in progress" and could be withdrawn at any time.

A proposed final agreement involving Great Falls and the other relicensing issues is expected in September, according to Vicki Taylor, executive coordinator of the Catawba-Wateree Relicensing Coalition in Charlotte. The agreement is to be submitted in the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in 2006.

American Whitewater also requested:

- A structure in the diversion dam above the long channel, such as a notch with a gate, to allow continuous flow and two-way fish passage.
- Removal of a limited number of trees now growing in the dry channels to eliminate obstructions and potential hazards for boaters.
- A system to alert boaters when high water from upstream rains spills over the diversion dams so paddlers can take advantage of short-lived paddling opportunities.

"The Great Falls of the Catawba have the potential to once again become a tourist destination -- and one that provides some significant economic benefits to the Town of Great Falls and the surrounding region," Colburn and Lazenby conclude.

ONLINE

The proposal can be viewed at www.americanwhitewater.org/archive/article/1304.

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