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Tennessee: State cites TVA for Ocoee sludge release at Olympic site

By: [Ron Clayton](#)

OCOEE, Tenn. — A deliberate TVA sludge release last weekend on the Ocoee River killed fish and aquatic life in the once-dead but now-recuperating Ocoee River, prompting a state investigation that on Friday brought a citation and new cleanup order against the already embattled Tennessee Valley Authority.

Now state and Cherokee National Forest officials are awaiting lab results from sludge samples, fearing that the mud, piled for decades behind the dam that separated the Ocoee from copper mining residue, may contain toxins such as PCBs and heavy metals.

“It didn’t look like normal releases,” said Jim Herrig, a U.S. Forest Service biologist, adding that officials hope to get results on the samples next week.

Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation spokeswoman Tisha Calabrese-Benton said state water regulators cited TVA with violations of the Tennessee Water Quality Control Act after bottom sediment from Ocoee Dam #3 was sluiced into the river.

The black and foul-smelling sludge “overwhelmed the river and the Olympic whitewater area of the Ocoee in some places more than three feet deep,” Ms. Calabrese-Benton said.

[PDF: TDEC's notice of violation to TVA](#)

[Article: Polk County: Fish swimming again in Ocoee](#)

The Ocoee River, devoid of life for nearly 100 years because of copper mining pollution, had begun show life again in the past five years after mining was halted and a Superfund cleanup had begun.

“We were just now documenting a very significant comeback,” Mr. Herrig said. “I’m disappointed. I’ve spoken to other biologist with TVA and they are concerned also. I think TVA will be doing some investigating of their own.”

TVA spokesmen Jim Allen and Barbara Martocci said they did not know why water was released from the bottom of Ocoee Dam #3 rather than the top, as is customary. Nor did they know how much water and sediment was released.

Ms. Martocci said TVA was drawing down the water behind the dam in preparation for repair work on the downstream Ocoee Dam #2 and in case of heavy rains. She said the move was for the safety of the crews working on Dam #2 and to give the workers time to get their equipment out if heavy rain came.

“We didn’t realize how much sediment was in it,” she said. “Some of the sediment was pulled with the water through the sluice gate.”

In the notice of violation, TDEC’s Chattanooga water pollution control manager, Richard Urban, said the state had received no permit requests or even inquiries about the “special operations” of the Ocoee series of dams and powerhouses.

“Due to the magnitude of the Ocoee, which flows to the Hiwassee and then to the Tennessee rivers, it was selected as the site for the 1996 Olympic whitewater events,” he wrote. “Thousands of people travel to the region each year to run the Ocoee rapids and swim. The river flows out of Georgia, and there it is called the Toccoa.

“Fish were killed and washed downstream or killed and buried in the mud/sludge/ooze,” he wrote. “No live fish were seen.”

Mr. Allen said TVA did not need permits for general maintenance work.

Mr. Herrig said some of the walkways were covered by the sludge, but the heavy rains Wednesday had eventually swept the material downstream. By Friday, the lower Ocoee appeared muddy, but Mr. Herrig said that was normal after so much rain.

Because of the clearing rains, he said Forest Service officials had not posted or roped off any areas of the Ocoee.

Ms. Martocci said TVA officials will determine what happened “to make sure it does not happen again, and we’ll respond accordingly to the notice (of violation).”

TDEC is giving TVA until Jan. 22 to submit a plan for restoring the river.