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No dumping signs appear on storm sewers

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Anti-dumping signs are showing up on storm drains in Richland and Lexington counties.

It's part of a new effort to discourage residents from pouring used engine oil and other substances that pollute into drains that empty into creeks and rivers.

So far, about 25 percent of 7,500 grates are marked in Richland County, said Srinivas Valavala, county storm-water manager.

The initial focus is on Northeast neighborhoods with drainage systems that flow into the Broad and Wateree rivers.

Since the markers began appearing last summer, authorities have found 35 incidents of people dumping dirty water from washing machines, food, grease, litter and septic waste.

Violators claimed they didn't know the dumping was illegal, county spokeswoman Tamara King said in a news release. No one has been prosecuted.

But those substances — and others, among them paint and related solvents, cleaning products, antifreeze and used oil — should not be put in drains.

The markers, officials say, are serving as a deterrent.

"If a person is dumping something into a storm drain, he can see it right there at the storm drain that it is an illegal act," Valavala said. "So we are targeting the source."

The placement of markers by community volunteers comes after state environmental officials cited the county in 2006 for failure to monitor water pollution.

Similar markers have appeared on drains in neighborhoods near the lower Saluda River since 2001, a step encouraged by state natural resources officials.

"More than anything, it builds awareness about the impact of dumping," said Bill Marshall, who focuses on the health of the 10-mile stretch of the river below the Lake Murray dams.

A group of area high school students associated with Keep the Midlands Beautiful put up 200 anti-dumping markers recently in four Lexington neighborhoods.

Storm drains in each empty into Twelve Mile Creek shortly before its water enters the river.

That increases the drains marked in Lexington County to 1,200, Marshall said.

Some residents of the neighborhoods call the markers reminders about small things you can do to reduce pollution.

"For the environment, we're glad to be good neighbors," said Mike Pondiscio, leader of the Hawthorne Homeowners Association.

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