

Guest column: Don't flush old medicines, take to Project Rx

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GUEST COLUMN

Stacey Flax is customer service/contract manager at Renewable Water Resources (ReWa) and Ashley Rhinehart is public relations coordinator at ReWa. ReWa's goal is to promote a cleaner environment, and to protect the public health and water quality of the Upstate waterways, while providing and developing the necessary sewer infrastructure for the growing economy.

There has been a lot of news lately about contaminants that have entered our Upstate waterway system. You probably heard the stories on the evening news, read it in the newspaper or maybe online. The detection of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control and several Upstate water treatment utilities has been concerning and worrisome to us all.

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Whether accidental or on purpose, disposing of any chemical

improperly is dangerous. But many people have no idea that their actions are dangerous.

When the PCBs were found in several Upstate water resource recovery facilities, we were all reminded of the challenges our community faces with keeping our resources safe. Water is the most precious resource we have, and we are blessed here in the Upstate to have water that is clean — because there are so many places in the world (and even in the United States) where that may not be the case.

Here in the Upstate, we consume water in so many ways — for drinking, cooking, bathing, cleaning, irrigation, recreational use, and even for the pure beauty of how it is woven into our landscape. We have the luxury of clean, obtainable and available water.

Through the renewed awareness of how harmful substances may enter our waterways, our community is reminded that we need to protect the environment. We may cringe at the thought of someone being careless and dangerously polluting our water, but is it possible that we, too, are responsible for pollution and do not even realize it? Many households are contributing to the pollution of our water and don't know it. And the pollutants are as common as over-the-counter and basic prescription medications.

Medications have a huge impact on our environment. Nearly 4 billion prescriptions are filled in the United States every year, and it has been estimated that as much as a third of the dispensed medication is unused — leading to potentially 200 million pounds of pharmaceuticals that could adversely affect the environment if disposed of improperly. Studies have found that pharmaceuticals are present in our nation's waterways and further research suggests that certain drugs may cause ecological harm. How did these medications even enter our waterways? They were either flushed down the toilet or poured down a sink.

Pouring and flushing old or unwanted medication down the sink and toilet is a common occurrence in America. And because of this, millions of people are drinking water laced with minute quantities of drugs.

A 2009 Associated Press investigation discovered that at least 41 million Americans drink water with detectable levels of pharmaceuticals. Although the drugs appear to pose no immediate health risks, experts concede that they really don't know how long-term exposure will affect people, or aquatic life, even at extremely low levels. In the 1970s, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) stopped encouraging flushing unwanted medications due to the concern of how it was affecting our water. Yet, 40 years later many people are still disposing of their medicines this way because they do not know of how else to dispose of the medications. Hence the need for Project Rx.

Project Rx is a collaboration among local organizations that are concerned about proper medication disposal. It is a bi-annual event that takes place on the same day as the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) National Drug Take-Back date. At the local event, you can bring your unwanted and expired medicines to one of our locations and drop them off for proper disposal.

Since 2010, we have had six Project Rx events in our area and have collected approximately 7,534 lbs. of medications — that's the weight of a killer whale! Our next event will be on Saturday, Oct. 26, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at McAlister Square and St. Francis Millenium Campus. No questions. No cost. And it's a drive-thru event, so you don't even have to get out of your car. It's quick. It's easy. And it's important to our environment.

So as the date approaches, go through your medicine cabinets and gather all your medications that have expired or are not being used. Remember that we can all do our part to keep our rivers, lakes and streams safe. And that bottle of antibiotics that expired in 1996 has got to go.