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Take more care with Mills River

The Mills River is too important to this county to allow it to be polluted. The river is a popular recreation spot for fishing, tubing and wading. It is the drinking water source for about half the county's 90,000-plus residents. Keeping it clean is vital to the health and welfare of county residents and to the county's economic well-being as well. That's why state and federal officials investigating last week's fish kill on the river should leave no stone unturned in their attempt to find out who is responsible. And once they do, the officials ought to come down hard on the polluter. Residents along the river began reporting seeing hundreds of dead fish in the river Friday. Officials from the state Division of Water Quality, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were quickly on the scene and have been trying to determine who and what caused the fish kill. They have found that the fish kill started in the river's South Fork between Old

Homeplace Lane and Dalton Road upstream of the Mills River Baptist Church. Evidence of pesticide mixing along stream banks points to a pesticide spill as the most likely cause. State officials say if they can establish who is responsible, they can make the culprit pay for the dead fish. That's good. The Wildlife Commission stocks the river with fish paid for by fisherman who buy fishing licenses. Someone who has been so irresponsible ought to have to pay the cost of replacing the fish. Federal officials are also looking at the health of the Appalachian elktoe mussel, an endangered species that exists in only seven streams in the world, including the Mills River. All of them are in Western North Carolina. If the mussels have been affected, the polluter could also face federal charges for harming an endangered species. The presence of a poison in the water also endangers people who like to play in the river. At least one company runs tubing trips down the Mills River and there is a summer camp on its banks, so there are people depending on the river for their livelihoods. What's worse, the intake for both the Hendersonville water system and a plant that is a supplemental water supply for Asheville are located just four to five miles downstream of where the spill occurred. So far, water plant workers say they have detected no evidence of pesticide in the water. However, they are conducting more extensive studies of raw and treated water to ensure safety. Just because there is no evidence of poison in the water supply doesn't mean the polluter is off the hook. Whether the spill was the result of carelessness, ignorance or willful disregard, if it happened once, it could happen again. Officials should make sure the fines and punishment for endangering a public water supply and recreation resource are substantial enough to deter future chemical spills.

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