

# METRO & STATE

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2000 ■ THE TIMES

## Pulp mill polluter blocks EPA test results

■ The agency tested for the poison dioxin. But Perry's largest employer contends that what's in its wastewater is confidential.

By JULIE HAUSERMAN  
Times Staff Writer

TALLAHASSEE — More than a year ago, federal scientists took samples near one of Florida's most polluted rivers to see if a pulp mill was releasing dioxin, an industrial poison that can cause cancer and harm wildlife.

But now, the government won't release all of the data, even though taxpayers paid the U.S.

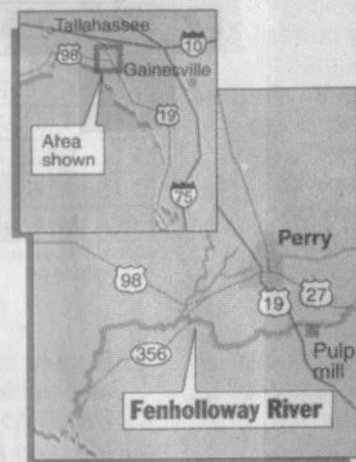
Environmental Protection Agency to take samples on Taylor County's Fenholloway River in the first place.

The reason: The polluting company, Tennessee-based Buckeye Florida, is blocking the release of all but one of the test results, claiming that telling the public what's in the plant's wastewater and sludge is "confidential business information." By law, the EPA has to review the claim.

"We don't think a Tennessee corporation should block information that Floridians have a right to. We ask the EPA to give us what we paid for," said Steve Medina, a lawyer who has been working to clean up the Fenholloway.

On Wednesday, Clean Water Network took its case to the public. The group says people have a right to know how much dioxin the EPA found, and in a \$50,000 radio advertising campaign that will air in Tallahassee and Gainesville, the group urges listeners to call EPA Administra-

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### Mill from 1B

tor Carol Browner to demand the information.

"We bent over backward to be patient," said Linda Young, Clean Water Network's southeastern coordinator.

The fight to get the test results is part of a long battle over pollution from the giant pulp mill, which is the largest employer in Perry, the small county seat of Taylor County in Florida's Big Bend.

The Fenholloway was once lush, with springs, a health resort and a bottling plant along its banks.

Today, the Fenholloway's black water has killed sea grasses for miles out in the gulf. Private wells in Perry have been polluted. Some fish in the river are starting to change sexes. Some insects there are deformed. And dioxin, which comes from chlorine bleaching, has accumulated in river sediment, possibly threatening wildlife.

special state law that made the Fenholloway the only Florida river set aside for purely industrial use. The law was rescinded, but the waters remain polluted.

Clean Water Network knew the EPA tested for dioxin in May and July of 1999, and continually asked for the results. This week, the EPA finally released one set of results, which didn't detect dioxin at the mill's discharge pipe. The other test results — more sophisticated water measurements and a look at Buckeye's prodigious volumes of black waste sludge — are being withheld.

A spokeswoman for the pulp mill, Sondra Dowdell, says releasing the results would give secrets to competitors.

"We're not blocking any information except what we consider confidential business information," Dowdell said. "We comply with all permits. We are moving forward to restore that river."

Consumer products giant Procter & Gamble opened the mill on the Fenholloway River in 1954 and ran it for decades, turning pine trees into pulp that goes into everything from diapers

able diapers to rayon, explosives and sausage casings. In the early 1990s, P&G sold the mill to a group of its former executives, who renamed it Buckeye. P&G is still the mill's largest customer.

Today, the Buckeye mill is operating on an expired permit with pollution rules that were written 10 years ago. The mill has spent millions to modernize. But its voluminous output on the tiny river takes a toll. Each day, the mill pumps up 51-million gallons of groundwater, mixes it with chemicals to "cook" pine trees and extract cellulose, then sends the treated waste into the 21-mile-long Fenholloway.

Buckeye and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection want to clean the Fenholloway by pumping the mill's waste into a 15-mile pipeline, which would empty at the river's mouth, near sensitive marine nursery grounds in the Gulf of Mexico, north of Cedar Key.

In 1998, the EPA objected to the pipeline plan, and promised to hold a hearing. Two years later, the hearing still hasn't been scheduled.