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**Jefferson County and Cahaba River Society Request End to Decades-Long Sewer Consent Decree
Cahaba River Society Applauds County Progress, Upgrades**

BIRMINGHAM, AL – The Jefferson County Commission has reached an agreement with the Cahaba River Society, represented by the Southern Environmental Law Center, to request an end to a decades-long consent decree requiring rehabilitation of the county’s sewer system.

The groups filed a joint request to terminate a 1996 consent decree, which also included the Environmental Protection Agency. As part of the agreement, the county committed to completing several additional capital improvement projects by early 2027 that are planned and funded to further reduce sewer overflows. The settlement confirms that Jefferson County has met the goals for improving the system’s infrastructure, operations, and maintenance under the decree, achieving industry best practices to minimize sewer overflows. The Federal District Court must approve the request before it is final.

The groups entered the consent decree after Cahaba River Society and private citizens sued Jefferson County for permit violations, including unpermitted discharge of wastewater containing raw sewage into the Black Warrior and Cahaba Rivers and tributaries in violation of the Clean Water Act. The decree contained a multiphase plan of implementing system upgrades and monitoring to bring the system into compliance.

Jefferson County has nine water reclamation facilities that serve about 600,000 citizens, including parts of Shelby and St. Clair counties. Since 1996, five of the county’s facilities and all the sewer lines leading to them have reached compliance and are no longer subject to the consent decree. Today’s agreement would release the final four sewer basins serving communities in the Valley Creek (including Shades Creek), Village Creek, Cahaba, and Five Mile Creek watersheds. The county manages more than 3,100 miles of sewer lines and treats more than 100 million gallons of wastewater per day.

“We applaud Jefferson County for making tremendous progress under the consent decree to repair their sewer system and institute robust methods for keeping it in good shape, such as capacity planning, overflow detection, and pipe cleanouts. Jefferson County’s sewer system is now light years ahead of where it was in the 1990s,” said Beth Stewart, the former Executive Director of the Cahaba River Society, who worked with the county throughout the consent decree. “Everyone in the county is benefiting from cleaner water quality in our creeks, rivers, and neighborhoods because of Jefferson County’s hard work and creative approaches.”

“We are proud of our compliance record to meet and even exceed the requirements of the Decree and to achieve this milestone of closing this matter. Our team has worked very hard to bring this to a conclusion,” said Jefferson County Attorney T. A. “Theo” Lawson.

“The vast improvements to the County’s sewer system that this resolution represents would not have happened without twenty-eight years of devotion and hard work put in by the Cahaba River Society, supported by Black Warrior Riverkeeper and Cahaba Riverkeeper” said Barry Brock, director of SELC’s

Alabama office. “SELC is proud to have partnered with these groups on this significant achievement for the people of Jefferson County.”

“Our sewer system is one of the most important infrastructures that the County provides to both citizens and businesses,” said Commission President Jimmie Stephens. “We have been working diligently on reducing overflows, improving capacity, and ensuring that we are discharging clean water back into our creeks and rivers since I took office. Our goal was not just to meet the requirements, but exceed them, for the health and welfare of our citizens.”

“Exiting the Consent Decree is the culmination of significant effort by many County employees to improve our infrastructure and not only meet, but exceed, our compliance obligations under the Clean Water Act. We have made remarkable progress in reducing overflows and improving water discharge quality throughout the region,” said David Denard, Jefferson County Director of Environmental Services.

Another tremendous benefit of the original sewer consent decree was the County’s investment of \$30 million into acquisition and protection of open space lands along creeks and rivers in the County. This Supplemental Environmental Project (SEP), which redirects environmental fines from federal coffers into local projects, was one of the first and largest ever approved in the nation’s history. The SEP led to the 1996 founding of the Freshwater Land Trust, which, to date, has since multiplied the County’s seed funding to build 129 miles of trails in Jefferson County, towards the Red Rock Trail System’s planned 750 miles, and conserve over 12,000 acres of land in Jefferson and thirteen other surrounding Central Alabama counties.

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The Southern Environmental Law Center is one of the nation’s most powerful defenders of the environment, rooted in the South. With a long track record, SELC takes on the toughest environmental challenges in court, in government, and in our communities to protect our region’s air, water, climate, wildlife, lands, and people. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the organization has a staff of 200, including more than 120 legal and policy experts, and is headquartered in Charlottesville, Va., with offices in Asheville, Atlanta, Birmingham, Chapel Hill, Charleston, Nashville, Richmond, and Washington, D.C.
southernenvironment.org

Cahaba River Society unites our community to restore and protect the Cahaba River watershed and its rich diversity of life. The Cahaba is a major source of our region’s drinking water. The diverse lives depending on the Cahaba include the people of the Birmingham metro area and Alabama’s Black Belt as well as the river’s globally significant biodiversity of freshwater life. CRS is an educator, expert resource, and collaborative partner for science-based, practical solutions. We inspire river stewardship by connecting people with the Cahaba for education, recreation, arts, and volunteerism, and have served over 44,000 youth with education in the river. We restore the river by promoting green Infrastructure and advocating for better policies and practices for clean water, natural flows, and diverse, healthy wildlife and people. Learn more at www.cahabariversociety.org.