



CENTRALINA
REGIONAL COUNCIL

South Fork River Health Committee Action Plan

October 2021

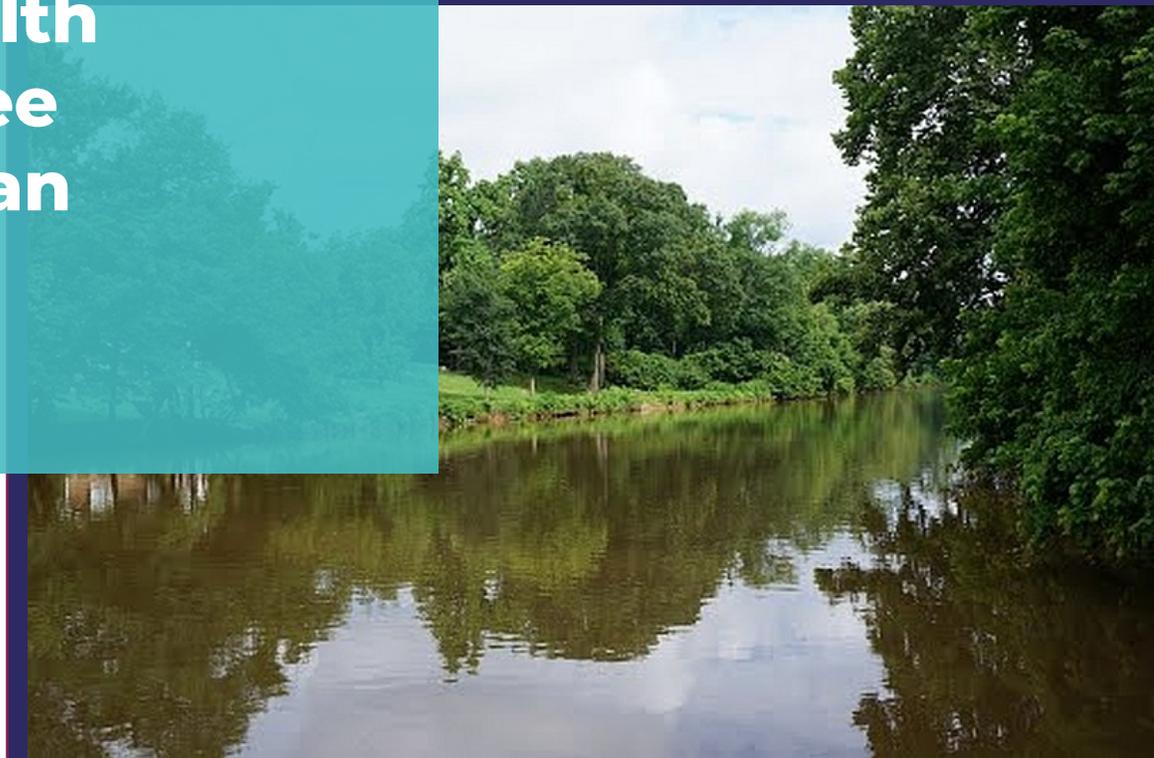


Image Source: Carolina Thread Trail Map

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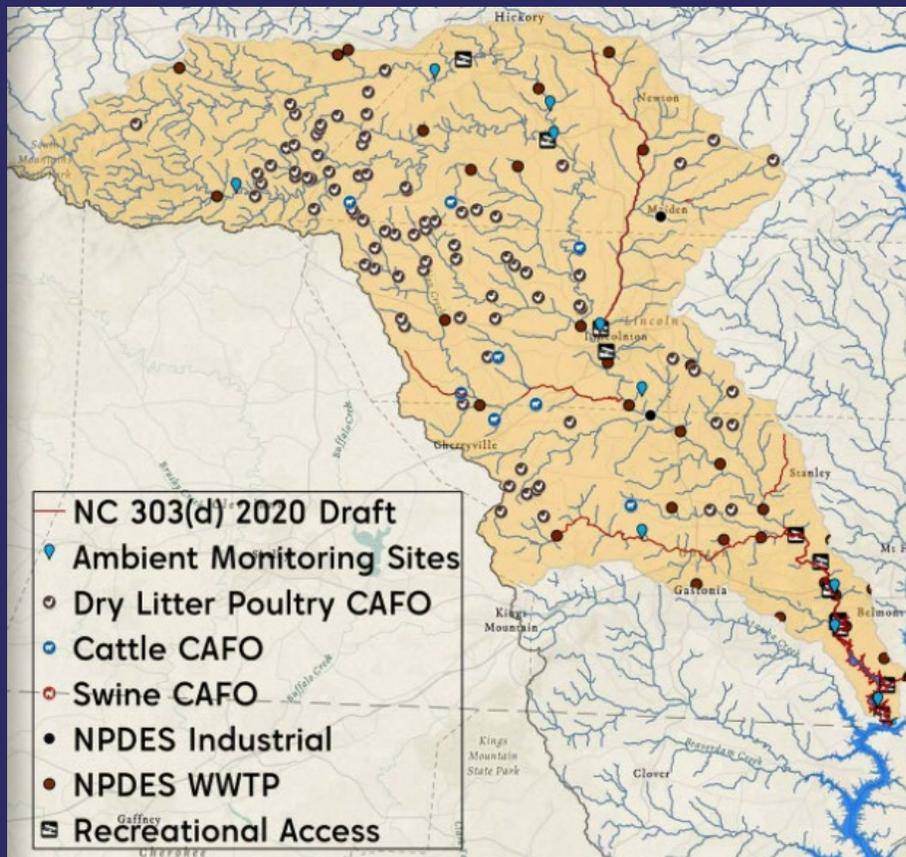


Image Source: Catawba Riverkeeper 2021 Catawba-Wataree State of the River Report

INTRODUCTION

The South Fork River is the largest tributary in the Catawba River system, and flows through Gaston, Lincoln and Catawba Counties. As a water supply source for communities in this area, the South Fork serves municipal, industrial, and agricultural users and offers a variety of recreational opportunities.

Population growth and development in the South Fork basin have resulted in adverse impacts on the river's health. Local leaders across the public and private sectors have identified a need to address these issues collectively through a coordinated approach that leverages existing efforts while exploring new opportunities to promote river health.

The South Fork River Health Committee

In late 2020, Town of Cramerton Mayor Will Cauthen assembled a group of representatives from local governments, area nonprofit organizations, and companies located in the southern Gaston County area of the South Fork River basin. The group also expanded to include staff representing state legislators and U.S. Congressional Representatives to ensure coordination. This voluntary group of stakeholders, now known as the South Fork River Health Committee (SFRHC), has been meeting monthly since January 2021 to achieve the following objectives:

- Convene and engage stakeholders about the critical issues facing the health and resilience of the South Fork
- Collaborate to create an action plan that will address challenges and achieve a specific vision of the river
- Advocate for the resources and implementation of the action plan

Complementary Efforts

Several organizations are working to address the challenges impacting the Catawba River system and the South Fork specifically.

- **Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation** – In addition to the Catawba Riverkeeper's water preservation and protection projects, the organization also leads river advocacy and public education programs.
- **Catawba Lands Conservancy and Carolina Thread Trail** – The Conservancy manages conservation projects along the South Fork River. The Thread Trail promotes the interconnectivity of the South Fork as a blueway.

- **Catawba-Wateree Water Management Group (CWWMG)** – The CWWMG has developed a basin-wide Water Supply Master Plan to ensure the Catawba-Wateree River basin’s water supply will support the region’s growing needs.

These ongoing projects reflect the importance of protecting water resources in this region. The severity of the threats to the South Fork’s health and their far-reaching implications indicates that a collaborative, regional approach is necessary to address these issues. The SFRHC does not seek to duplicate existing efforts, but instead proposes increased coordination to ensure success.

Overview of the Planning Process

Centralina Regional Council facilitated a nine-month long planning process with the SFRHC to develop this action plan. The stages of the planning process included:

- Examining the current state
- Visioning and goal setting
- Focused action planning
- Drafting and reviewing proposed recommendations

The remainder of this report summarizes the major outcomes of the planning process and lays out the major recommendations of the action plan.

The Action Plan

The SFRHC’s action plan is the result of a collaborative engagement process involving stakeholders throughout the South Fork basin. This planning document envisions a preferred future for the river and outlines a set of recommended strategies and associated actions to realize it. The SFRHC, Centralina and partners will share the action plan with additional South Fork stakeholders as a roadmap for a healthier future for the river.

THE CURRENT STATE

As part of its ongoing work to preserve and protect the waters of the Catawba River basin, the Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation has completed an in-depth assessment of the Catawba River system, including the South Fork's existing health conditions. In an analysis of water quality metrics, the South Fork basin rated the lowest among the Catawba River's four sub-watersheds. Although the basin received high scores in the point source pollution and water quantity categories, the river received low scores in the monitoring, nonpoint source pollution and recreation categories. A summary of the Catawba Riverkeeper's scores and findings is shown below.

South Fork Basin Assessment

Monitoring – 3

- Only one sampling site off the main channel, no recent data available from state.
- While many segments have been identified as impaired, little has been done to improve water quality.
- Local municipalities formed the South Fork River Health Committee which has funded additional monitoring and is creating a coalition to address water quality and flooding concerns.
- New sampling sites and Boathouse.

Point Source Pollution – 4

- Few major facilities.
- No significant violations reported in the last 3 years.

Nonpoint Source Pollution – 2

- Notoriously turbid, data available indicates the problem is widespread.
- Examples of urban, sub-urban, and rural runoff. Problem is widespread and includes legacy land use.
- Most of Lincoln County is not covered by a post-construction stormwater ordinance.

Water Quantity – 4

- Some flooding in the southern end. No dams are used for flow management.
- No organization of withdrawers.

Recreation – 3

- South Mountain State Park is excellent but crowded.
- New access points and improved parking, however, numerous log jams and dams between the State Park and Carolina Thread Trail Blueway.
- High levels of bacteria and consistent turbidity after rainfall.

Source: Catawba Riverkeeper 2021 Catawba-Wateree State of the River Report

The Catawba Riverkeeper has also identified four existing threats to the South Fork:

- **Legacy pollution:** Contamination from sediment, chemicals and industrial products that remain in the environment long after they were introduced
- **Land clearing:** Forest removal and construction activities associated with development that disturbs the land, resulting in runoff that deposits pollutants into the river’s waterways
- **Agricultural runoff:** Runoff from poultry and dairy operations that introduces bacteria into the water supply
- **Post-construction stormwater:** Runoff produced after developments are constructed

In examining the current state, the SFRHC conducted a SWOT analysis to identify the South Fork’s strengths, weaknesses/challenges, opportunities, and threats. The table below summarizes the results of this analysis.

SWOT Analysis Summary

Strengths & Assets	Challenges	Opportunities to Leverage	Threats to Success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreation • Long, undeveloped, free flowing sections, natural beauty • Connects several small communities • Tourism/eco-tourism • Non-motorized boats • Water supply • Thread Trail, blueway • Land conservation adjacent • Accessible / accessibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muddy appearance • Sedimentation • Flooding (frequency, severity, fragility) • Growth and development impact • Addressing upstream impacts • Precipitation-driven pollution; nonpoint source pollution • Water quality • Accessibility • Plastic and other trash • Public education about the river’s importance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation-focused development • Higher regulations / standards along the river • Increased buffers • Land conservancies, etc. that focus on nonpoint source pollution • Collaboration • Grant funding – 319 program for restoration • Public engagement and education (e.g., at access points) • Trails along the river so people will visit and take an interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in collaborating with upstream users • Weak state regulations • Lack of funding • Working in silos • Urbanization and impervious surfaces • Leverage to address nonpoint source pollution sources such as farming activities • Inability to identify sources of problems • Increasing residential development • Existing development

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism (e.g., Asheville) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drought and flood • Climate change
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Throughout the planning process, the SFRHC received presentations from subject-matter experts, including the Catawba Riverkeeper, the Catawba-Wateree Water Management Group, and the Town of Cramerton’s Parks and Recreation Department. These reports helped provide context and informed the SFRHC’s group discussions during a series of brainstorming sessions in the visioning, goal setting, and focused action planning stages of the process.

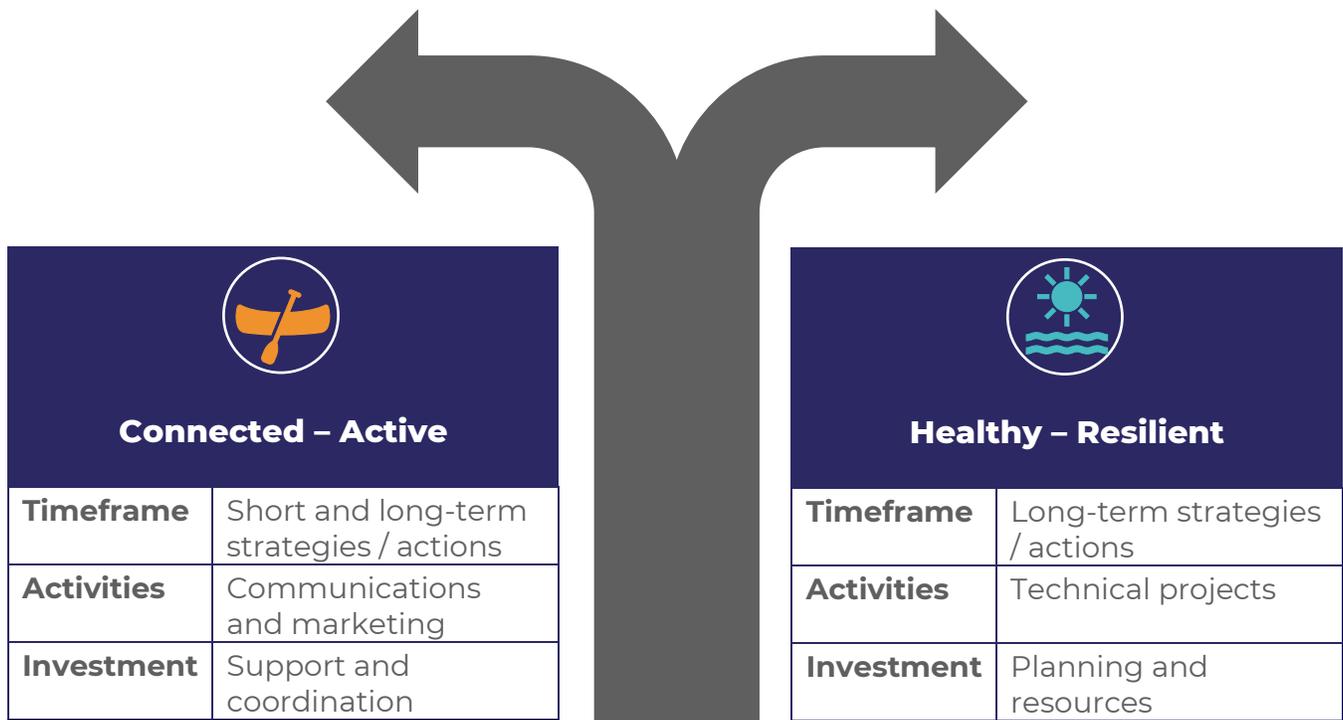
On behalf of the SFRHC, Centralina Regional Council reached out to upstream communities within the South Fork basin to brief them on the committee’s progress and ensure alignment with their efforts.

SETTING THE VISION

Four overarching themes emerged during the visioning stage of the planning process:

- A **Connected** River
- An **Active** River
- A **Healthy** River
- A **Resilient** River

While the integration of the four vision themes is key to the South Fork’s success, the SFRHC recognized some overlap between the Connected and Active themes and between the Healthy and Resilient themes. As a result, the SFRHC grouped the four themes into two pairs: Connected-Active and Healthy-Resilient. Combining the vision themes in this way created a framework for the action plan. Each of the recommended strategies in the plan is associated with one of these vision theme pairs.



The Connected-Active theme covers short-term and long-term approaches. These items include communications and marketing activities that require stakeholders to provide support and coordination. The Healthy-Resilient strategies and actions are long-term approaches. These items include technical projects that require stakeholders to provide planning and resources.

STRATEGIES & ACTIONS

There are many activities stakeholders in the South Fork basin can undertake to realize the SFRHC’s collective vision for the river’s future. The Strategies & Actions section lists steps for achieving this vision.

The recommended strategies are organized by priority level. Icons represent how each strategy connects to the Connected-Active and Healthy-Resilient vision themes. Because of the threats to the South Fork’s health, all the Healthy-Resilient strategies are identified as high priorities. Specific action items are listed under each strategy along with a suggested entity to lead those activities.



Strategy 1

Implement enhanced stormwater management policies

Priority Level: High

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
1-A. Develop consistent stormwater regulations and watershed plans	Catawba Riverkeeper Gaston County Natural Resources Department



Strategy 2

Establish a common set of development standards

Priority Level: High

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
2-A. Use SFRHC as vehicle for continuing conversations about code language	SFRHC Subcommittee Gaston County Planning and Development Services Department Gaston Municipalities
2-B. Share model code language with counterparts in Lincoln and Catawba Counties	Centralina Regional Council



Strategy 3

Coordinate watershed planning and management

Priority Level: High

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
3-A. Apply for NC Land & Water Fund planning grant to develop an EPA 9-element watershed restoration plan	Catawba Riverkeeper
3-B. Develop an EPA 9-element watershed restoration plan	
3-C. Apply for NCDEQ 319 grant to support execution projects in the 9-element watershed restoration plan	
3-D. Restore creeks and streams to enhance wildlife habitat	Catawba Riverkeeper Gaston County Natural Resources Department
3-E. Coordinate with soil and water conservation districts on erosion control and buffer restoration	
3-F. Advocate for dredging projects in areas with substantial amounts of sedimentation	Catawba Riverkeeper Centralina Regional Council Gaston County Natural Resources Department



Strategy 4

Increase floodplain capacity and riverbank sustainability

Priority Level: High

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
4-A. Support land conservation activities	Catawba Riverkeeper Catawba Lands Conservancy
4-B. Investigate federal and state funding opportunities to support flood mitigation (e.g., Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program)	Carolina Land and Lakes Catawba Riverkeeper Catawba Lands Conservancy Centralina Regional Council Gaston County Planning and Development Services Department
4-C. Coordinate with state partners to explore impact of removing Armstrong Ford Road Dam and other alternatives to dam removal	SFRHC Subcommittee



Strategy 5

Improve water quality

Priority Level: High

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
5-A. Leverage and expand current monitoring activities	Catawba Riverkeeper City of Lowell



Strategy 6

Develop a comprehensive South Fork access plan from convergence of Jacob Fork and Henry Fork to Lake Wylie

Priority Level: High

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
6-A. Enhance coordination between Gaston County and Lincoln County on access point planning projects that are underway	SFRHC Subcommittee Centralina Regional Council
6-B. Connect with Catawba County on their access plan for upstream areas	
6-C. Expand SFRHC to include Lincoln and Catawba Counties to develop a comprehensive, inter-jurisdictional South Fork Master Plan	Catawba Riverkeeper to lead convening of municipalities to coordinate on master plan content for grant seeking Centralina Regional Council Mayor Will Cauthen
6-D. Pursue NC Land & Water Fund grant (<i>see also strategy 3-A.</i>) and Parks and Recreation Trust Fund grant for master planning process	



Strategy 7

Pursue state engagement and advocacy

Priority Level: Medium

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
7-A. Advocate for changes in state requirements for drainage basins, watersheds, and buffer zones	Catawba Riverkeeper Centralina Regional Council
7-B. Encourage regional delegation's engagement with the Senate Select Committee on Storm Related River Debris and Damage	

7-C. Contribute data to NCDEQ	
7-D. Support Catawba Riverkeeper's outreach to NCDOT for response on Armstrong Ford Road Dam	Centralina Regional Council Mayor Will Cauthen SFRHC Subcommittee



Strategy 8

Develop a coordinated public information and education plan

Priority Level: Medium

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
8-A. Direct communications efforts through Catawba Riverkeeper in coordination with their ongoing public information and education activities	SFRHC Subcommittee
8-B. Engage in placemaking projects for bridges	
8-C. Develop clear, unified messaging stakeholder communities and partners can share across their communication platforms	Gaston Business Association Go Gaston
8-D. Disseminate info to the public in an engaging and easy to process way to create sense of ownership	
8-E. Explore need for improving wayfinding systems to help with communicating location to emergency responders	Gaston County Parks & Recreation Department Lake Wylie Marine Commission
8-F. Incorporate public art into wayfinding, safety and informational signage design	



Strategy 9

Increase promotion of existing events and explore opportunities to create new events and spaces that will bring people to the river

Priority Level: Medium

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
9-A. Connect with Go Gaston and Axios to support their promotional efforts and identify opportunities to improve connectedness from a tourism standpoint	Gaston Municipalities' Parks & Recreation Departments SFRHC Subcommittee
9-B. Establish partnerships with local and private businesses (e.g., breweries, outfitters, river-oriented businesses, and businesses with philanthropic side) to support marketing and communications activities and event coordination	
9-C. Expand offerings of youth-oriented educational programming, volunteer activities, and South Fork-specific special events, as needed 9-D. Organize a large-scale, multi-jurisdictional event to attract people to South Fork (e.g., Anything That Floats Parade on French Broad River in Asheville)	Catawba Riverkeeper Gaston County Parks & Recreation Department Gaston Municipalities' Parks & Recreation Departments YMCA



Strategy 10

Engage new audiences in river awareness and recreational opportunities

Priority Level: Medium

Action Items	Suggested Lead Party
10-A. Expand on efforts to create equitable recreational opportunities by connecting with and leveraging engagement activities of other organizations (e.g., Black Folks Camp Too)	City of Lowell Gaston County Parks & Recreation Department SFRHC Subcommittee
10-B. Organize activities for beginners to help them become more comfortable with accessing the river	

CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

Realizing the action plan will require the continued collaboration of stakeholders throughout the South Fork basin. Having strong leadership to move the plan forward is key to its implementation. The Catawba Riverkeeper has indicated that it will take the lead on the technical aspects of the action plan related to the Healthy-Resilient strategies. A suggested next step is to form a subcommittee of the SFRHC to take the lead on several other action items listed in the Strategies & Actions section. In the subcommittee formation process, the SFRHC should consider engaging additional stakeholder groups and entities such as upstream communities, other municipalities, local and regional nonprofits and conservancies, and community groups.

As an additional next step, the SFRHC will need to secure commitments from stakeholders to support action plan implementation. Centralina Regional Council will provide continued support of the SFRHC and assist with legislative advocacy and regional coordination across counties in the South Fork basin.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: South Fork River Health Committee Membership

Name		Organization	Title	Email
Kevin	Krouse	Belmont, City of	Assistant City Manager	kkrouse@cityofbelmont.org
Martha	Stowe	Belmont, City of	Council Member	mstowe@cityofbelmont.org
Hayden	Davis	Belmont, City of	Stormwater Coordinator	hdavis@cityofbelmont.org
Peyton	Ratchford	Belmont, City of	Planning Technician	pratchford@cityofbelmont.org
Melissa	Patton	Carolina Land and Lakes	Executive Director	melissa@carolinalandandlakesrcd.org
Bart	Landess	Catawba Lands Conservancy	Executive Director	bart@catawbalands.org
John	Searby	Catawba Riverkeeper	Executive Director	john@catawbariverkeeper.org
Brandon	Jones	Catawba Riverkeeper	Riverkeeper	brandon@catawbariverkeeper.org
+ Geraldine	Gardner	Centralina Regional Council	Executive Director	ggardner@centralina.org
+ Kelly	Weston	Centralina Regional Council	GAME Coordinator	kweston@centralina.org
* Will	Cauthen	Cramerton, Town of	Mayor	wcauthen@cramerton.org
Richard	Atkinson	Cramerton, Town of	Commissioner	ratkinson@cramerton.org
Eric	Smallwood	Cramerton, Town of	Parks & Recreation Director	esmallwood@cramerton.org
Ronnie	Worley	Gaston County	Commissioner	ronnie.worley@gastongov.com
Jena	Goodman	Gaston County	Flood & Watershed Administrator	jena.goodman@gastongov.com
Joseph	Alm	Gaston County	Stormwater Administrator	Joseph.Alm@gastongov.com
Joseph	Sciba	Gaston County	Building Inspections Director	joseph.sciba@gastongov.com
Stephanie	Scheringer	Gastonia - Two Rivers Utilities	Division Manager	stephanies@tworiversutilities.com
Neil	Brennan	Lake Wylie Marine Commission	Executive Director	nmbnavy66@gmail.com
Scott	Attaway	Lowell, City of	City Manager	sattaway@lowellinc.com
Greg	Richardson	McAdenville, Town of	Council Member	g.richardson@townofmcadenville.org

Bill	Carstarphen	Pharr USA	President	bill.carstarphen@pharrusa.com
Audrey	Bishop	Rep. Virginia Foxx	District Director	audrey.bishop@mail.house.gov
Kyle	Sanders	Sen. Thom Tillis	Deputy Chief of Staff	kyle_sanders@tillis.senate.gov
Joel	Gillison	Sen. Kathy Harrington	Policy Advisor	Joel.Gillison@ncleg.gov
+ <i>Facilitators</i>				
* <i>Organizing Chair</i>				

Appendix B: Potential Funding Sources

Descriptions of the grant programs and other funding sources referenced in the action plan are included in the table below.

Federal and State Funding Opportunities
<p>319 Grant Program NCDEQ grant program that funds the implementation of watershed restoration plans to restore waters impaired by nonpoint sources of pollution</p> <p>https://deq.nc.gov/outreach/grants</p>
<p>Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Program FEMA program that provides support for hazard mitigation projects</p> <p>https://www.fema.gov/grants/mitigation/building-resilient-infrastructure-communities</p>
<p>NC Land and Water Fund Grant State grant program that funds projects to acquire lands, restore fish and wildlife habitats, and enhance the filtering of stormwater runoff to reduce pollutants from entering water supplies</p> <p>https://nclwf.nc.gov/grants</p>
<p>Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Grant State grant program to assist with public park and recreational projects and the protection of natural and scenic resources</p> <p>https://www.ncparks.gov/more-about-us/parks-recreation-trust-fund/parks-and-recreation-trust-fund</p>

