

## **Pay attention to our environment**

---

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board

08.25.09 - 02:59 am

The Alabama Department of Environmental Management was chided last week by the ADEM Reform Coalition, a group of 40 environmental organizations, for the drop in enforcement actions and penalties for violations of the Clean Water Act.

Figures presented to the Environmental Management Commission, which oversees ADEM, show that where ADEM imposed \$1.27 million in penalties in 2008, it only imposed \$146,500 for the first three quarters of 2009.

It is not the first time ADEM has been called to explain such a reduction. In 2007, the Environmental Protection Agency noted a "dramatic decline" in the state agency's enforcement activity.

Contending that EPA statistics on which the coalition report was based were "not up-to-date" and "questioned," ADEM downplayed the findings. "We haven't paid them (the coalition) much attention because they're wrong," was the reply.

Well, maybe ADEM should pay attention.

Granted, if the \$800 million in water fines that are still "pending — at public notice or not finished yet" are collected, then figures for 2009 come right up there with the year before. And it's also important to take into account the effect budget cuts and reorganization have had on ADEM.

That said, the coalition's report should not just be labeled "wrong" and brushed aside. Say what you will about EPA statistics, they do show a trend that should be addressed or at least fully explained.

Moreover, since ADEM agrees with the coalition that water pollution from development runoff is one of the biggest problems facing Alabama's streams today, it would seem reasonable that the two groups could work together on a solution instead of pointing fingers and blaming statistics.

ADEM, understaffed and under-funded like most state agencies in these times of recession, is being called on to do a lot with less. However, if ADEM does not do the job, the EPA might come in and enforce the law.

If that happens, Alabamians will again moan and groan over how the federal government is taking authority away from the state. Instead, what would be happening is Washington taking responsibility when Alabama failed to do so.

If that occurs, Alabama will have no one to blame but itself.