



The Star-Ledger

Lower Passaic gets a checkup

New \$37M study to track river's primary polluters

Thursday, October 23, 2008

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All the locals know the lower six miles of the Lower Passaic River is badly polluted. Most who are familiar with the brown waterway that courses through Passaic and Essex counties have heard about the poisons that have been dumped there, some by the former Diamond Shamrock pesticide plant.

But just how dirty is the rest of the river? And how dangerous is it to animals and humans?

A massive study that began in July is meant to be the final word on the state of the river.

A 6-mile portion of the river, in front of the old Diamond Shamrock site, is known to have petroleum products, pesticides, all manner of chemicals, even byproducts of Agent Orange in the sediment and water. But the new \$37 million study, paid for by companies who were found to be "potentially responsible parties" in the pollution, will take a look at all 17 miles of the Lower Passaic.

"When this project is done, we should know what's in the river and how to clean it up," said Ella Filippone, director of the Passaic River Coalition, an environmental group which is advising study officials. On a tour of the river yesterday, Filippone pointed out decrepit factories, rotting docks and piers and black sludge along the riverbanks. "As the river drains (during changing tides) you can see little rivulets of oil running down the bank."

In June of last year, the 73 companies identified by the Environmental Protection Agency came together and agreed to pay for a study that takes core sediment samples from the riverbed and will later study water and fish in the river. Work started in July with the Massachusetts-based ENSR firm. This is a separate agreement from the one announced in June for the cleanup of sediment directly in front of the old Diamond Shamrock site.

Yesterday, with a clear view of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center on the banks of the river, a group of scientists dressed in white, full-length protective suits dropped spring-loaded claws to the bottom of the Passaic River to scoop up about 6 inches of sediment for testing.

After that sediment is cleared, a drill with a 10-foot long enclosed plastic tube is then bored into the earth to bring up layers of sediment from the riverbed. Due to strict EPA guidelines, the tube must remain in a vertical position while samples are extracted so the layers of sediment don't mix.

"It's like a timeline," said Capt. Al Modjeski, the onsite field coordinator from the engineering firm. He said the layers of sediment reveal when different contaminants were dumped into the river. "It's a road map of pollutants."

Those pollutants include dioxin -- a carcinogen that was knowingly dumped into the river by the Diamond Shamrock company. It's a byproduct of the chemical Agent Orange that was used by the U.S. Department of Defense in the Vietnam War to defoliate trees in the jungle.

Once the tube is brought to the surface, a hole is punched in the top with a hand drill to drain off excess water, making it less likely for the sediment to "jostle around," Modjeski said. The top of the tube is sealed with an airtight red cap to create a vacuum. Then a hacksaw is used to cut the tube into about one-foot-long pieces. Because the integrity of the layers must be maintained, workers must hold the tube in a vertical position throughout the process. The pieces are resealed and sent off to a lab for processing.

The firm is taking 750 such core samples from 115 locations along the river, and should finish by December. They sampled in areas from the Dundee Dam, on the border of Garfield and Clifton, down to the mouth of the Newark Bay.

The next step -- the water and fish testing -- are scheduled to be completed in 2013. After all the testing, it's up to the EPA to decide what, if any, action is necessary. They'll also decide if more companies who do business along the river banks can be designated as "potentially responsible parties."

If the EPA decides to take action to clean up the site, it's back to wrangling with all the potentially responsible companies to decide who will pay for the actual cleanup and how much they'll contribute.

The companies have formed a group called the Lower Passaic Cooperating Parties Group. According to the group's website, lowerpr.com, it includes large pharmaceutical companies like Bristol-Myers Squibb and Pfizer, public works agencies like PSE&G and consumer products companies like Newell Rubbermaid Inc. According to the EPA project manager Alice Yeh, the companies have voluntarily entered into this settlement. If they don't cooperate and the EPA decides to use public funds to clean up the site, companies risk being sued for up to three times the cost of the cleanup and study, under Superfund site rules.

Filippone is relieved the companies are cooperating with state and federal agencies. In the near future, she wants to see the river used for both commercial and recreational use, including boating and riverside restaurants.

"It's enough testing," said Philippone, who wants the cleanup to start soon. "Now do it, get it done."

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