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By **S.P. Sullivan/NJ.com**NJ.com
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## Removal of toxic muck from Passaic River in Lyndhurst a 'pilot project' for massive clean-up

A $20 million remediation project along the Passaic River in Lyndhurst has been completed, with more than 16,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment removed from the river.

S.P. Sullivan/NJ.com

By S.P. Sullivan

NJ.com

June 10, 2014 at 9:37 AM

LYNDHURST — Crews have finished removing just over 16,000 cubic yards of highly toxic sediment from a six-acre mudflat along the Passaic River, an early step in a multi-year federal cleanup spanning from Garfield down to Newark Bay.

The $20 million project, near Riverside County Park in Lyndhurst, is just a small part of what officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency expect to be one of the largest federal Superfund projects in history.

The 17-mile stretch of the Passaic contains layers of sediment contaminated with mercury, PCBs and cancer-causing dioxin, a byproduct of the Agent Orange manufactured by the Diamond Alkali Co. plant in Newark during the 1960s.

The site was added to the federal Superfund list in 1984, and the Diamond Alkali facility was capped in 2001.

But because the Passaic is a tidal river, those harmful materials spent decades traveling up and down its banks, some of it settling on the mudflats next to the Riverside County Park, which contains county and municipal ball fields and recreational access points to the river.

That direct contact with local residents prompted federal officials to fast-track the cleanup of what's been dubbed "site 10.9," which denotes the river mile of the contamination. The project, announced last summer, was expected to take four months but lasted for ten, hampered by poor weather and ailing infrastructure along the river. Initial plans were to remove 20,000 cubic yards, but the project ultimately turned up 16,020 cubic yards, officials said.

The project area included a 5.5 acre stretch of the river adjacent to the park, except for a narrow "no-dredge zone" that contained 16-inch water lines owned by the Jersey City Municipal Utilities Authority, which crews had to avoid as they scraped material from the riverbed.

Capping commenced in November, and installation was finished at the end of May, according to David Kluesner, a spokesman for the EPA. The agency is still negotiating with the Cooperating Parties Group, a collection of 67 companies deemed partially responsible for the pollution, over long-term monitoring of the site.

A 'PILOT PROJECT' FOR LARGE-SCALE CLEAN-UP

The crews scooped out two feet of contaminated sediment, replacing it with layers of sand and carbon, which was then covered with a permeable "geotextile" fabric, and topped off with rock and more sand. The contaminated material was then shipped by barge downriver to a processing facility in Kearny, and ultimately sent by rail to a landfill in Oklahoma.

John Rolfe, a project manager for De Maximis, Inc., the environmental firm handling the remediation on

behalf of the Cooperating Parties Group, said Monday that the cleanup faced unique challenges in excavating harmful material from a tidal river, whose depth and breadth can change on the hour, depending on a number of conditions.

John Rolfe, a project manager for De Maximis, Inc., discusses a recently-completed clean-up of contaminated mudflats along the Passaic River in Lyndhurst. S.P.Sullivan

"The way we did everything out here is going to be a model, I think, for how it's done in the future," Rolfe said. "It'll be on a bigger scale."

The Lyndhurst project wraps up as federal officials continue to mull how to dispose of an estimated 4.3 million cubic yards of toxic muck downriver, a massive cleanup that dwarfs the work done at 10.9 but will likely present the same hairy engineering problems.

In addition to contending with the tides, crews will have to squeeze barges through a series of decades-old bridges, many of which have to be lifted to allow the vessels to pass, tying up traffic and delaying the project when their mechanisms break down.

The Cooperating Parties Group has been pushing their own proposal, dubbed the "Sustainable Remedy," that would target high-concentration "hot spots" of toxic material along the entire 17 miles instead of dredging the river bank-to-bank in the more heavily polluted lower eight, reducing barge traffic on the river.

Critics of their plan, including federal officials and environmental groups, accuse the companies of trying to push a less costly and less extensive clean up on the Passaic.

The EPA has presented the public with its own options to scrub the lower eight miles of the river, and is still studying the extent of pollution elsewhere on the river and in Newark Bay.

SUPERFUND CLEAN UP INCHES FORWARD

The Lyndhurst site has been the cause of a lot of anxiety for local residents because of its tendency to flood during storms, inundating the park and the basements of nearby homes with river water. The EPA tested park grounds after flooding caused by Tropical Storm Lee and Hurricane Irene in 2011 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012, which turned up traces of mercury, PCBs and dioxin but found that they appeared "well below levels of concern."

Rolfe said the current cap is expected to withstand major storms, keeping any remaining harmful material beneath the cap from being roused back into suspension by severe weather. But he said any sediment present upriver or downriver from the 10.9 project site could theoretically end up on the river's banks during a major storm.

"I'd worry more about bacteria from sewer discharges," added his colleague, senior project director Willard Potter, pointing to another frequent source of contamination on the Passaic.

The cleanup at river mile 10.9 and the current study of the lower eight miles are just two pieces of an ongoing effort to remediate the 17-mile stretch of river that makes up the federal Superfund. The Cooperating Parties Group is expected to complete their study at the end of the year, Potter said, which will be submitted to the feds for consideration.

"The plan is to incorporate the results of the 17-mile study with the plan for the lower eight miles," the EPA's Kluesner told NJ.com. "We do envision it working well together."

The agency will hold another public meeting on the project June 23 at 2 p.m. at the Belleville senior center, and the public comment period was recently extended to August 20.

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