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Feds mull how to dredge polluted Passaic — and where to put contaminated muck

By S.P. Sullivan

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KEARNY — The removal of toxic sediment from the Passaic River is an idea whose time has come, federal officials said at a meeting Wednesday evening. The only question is where to put the stuff.

Officials from the Environmental Protection Agency presented proposals for an extensive project to remove dioxin and other harmful chemicals from an eight-mile stretch of the river — described as one of the largest Superfund cleanups ever proposed — during the second of three public hearings in Kearny.

The plan, announced last month, includes several options that would take anywhere from just under 1 million cubic yards of tainted sediment to the entire estimated 9.7 million, out of the river. The agency's preferred option would extract 4.3 million — enough to fill Met Life Stadium twice over — from an eight-mile stretch.

There are also several options still on the table for where all that material will end up. One possibility, dubbed the "contained aquatic disposal" option, would bury the sediment in a clay pit at the bottom of Newark Bay. Other options, preferred by both the EPA and state officials, would remove and treat water from the sediment on site and ship the sediment elsewhere, either to be buried in landfills, incinerated, or decontaminated for "beneficial reuse" as concrete or landfill cover.

If carted off, the sediment would end up in any number of approved facilities in the U.S. and Canada, officials said.

(Read detailed descriptions of the options on the EPA's website.)

All of that material would come from the lower eight miles of the 17-mile stretch of the river that makes up one of largest Superfund sites in the United States, with a legacy of pollution that includes the dumping of Agent Orange by the Diamond Alkali Co. in the 1960s.

"The river is filled with a large inventory of contaminated sediments," Alice Yeh, the EPA's project manager for the Passaic Superfund, said. "The bottom line is, you have to start somewhere."

LONG RIVER, LONG HISTORY

The Passaic is a long river — New Jersey's longest, touching seven counties as it cuts a jagged 80-mile path through the state.

It's also among the nation's dirtiest rivers, the legacy of its past as an industrial engine of the region, which harnessed its Great Falls to power factories, overburdened its channels with barges and sent pollutants, untreated, into its waters.

Federal officials estimate that some 85-90 percent of the contamination sits in the eight mile stretch from Newark Bay up to North Arlington. Studies of the extent of pollution of the entire 17-miles of the Lower Passaic and Newark Bay are ongoing, and last year, a separate cleanup removed 20,000 cubic yards of sediment upriver in Lyndhurst.

"This is a long and complex river, and so EPA is cleaning it up in stages," Yeh said.

Those eight miles contain a navigation channel constructed toward the end of the 19th century, meaning the riverbed was dug deep to accommodate large ships. But regular dredging ceased in the 1950s, just as industry in the area kicked into high gear, creating a layer cake of sediment on the riverbed that gets more dangerous and contaminated as you move down into New Jersey's industrial past.

"This is a long and complex river, and so EPA is cleaning it up in stages."

Aside from the dioxin that comes from the Agent Orange dumped in the river, officials say there are PCBs, DDT and mercury in the river bed and on the banks of the Passaic, among other contaminants. Those pollutants find their way into the worms and other bottom feeders in the muck, which in turn get eaten by fish, which are then consumed by birds, aquatic mammals and — sometimes — humans.

Crabbing has been banned for years, and the state strongly advises against consuming much else from the river, though fisherman can still be spotted along the Passaic today.

Meiyin Wu, the director of the Passaic River Institute at Montclair State University, told NJ.com before the hearing that the entire river has varying levels of contamination buried in its beds and banks, some of which gets disturbed daily with the tides. Other, potentially more harmful material, gets roused during major storms.

"It's kind of like a time bomb that's there," she said. "You never know when it will happen, and to what level."

WHERE DOES IT ALL GO?

EPA officials took questions and comments from the public on the entire plan Wednesday, hearing from community leaders who wanted guarantees that jobs created would go first to local residents, officials concerned about the project's impact on the area's aging bridge infrastructure and boaters and rowers worried that all the activity would render the Passaic unusable for the next decade.

They were particularly interested in comments on the disposal methods, and heard little support for the plan to sequester the sediment deep beneath the bay.

Bill Sheehan, captain of the environmental group Hackensack Riverkeeper, told EPA officials that in past lawsuits the group has filed against corporate polluters, a judge had ordered less harmful materials sent to licensed facilities off-site.

"We shouldn't even be entertaining the idea of digging a pit in Newark Bay, because all that does is take what poison you dig out and move it downstream," Sheehan said. "As a matter of fact, you should just put a line through it right now."

The agency is also getting pushback from some of its responsible parties — the more than 100 companies that either dumped into the river or inherited liability for the dumping.

The Lower Passaic River Study Area Cooperating Parties Group, an organization of 67 of the groups considered partially responsible for the condition of the river, calls the EPA's plan "massive, impractical, and disruptive," according to a statement from Jonathan Jaffe, the group's spokesman.

They're advocating for their own proposal, dubbed the "sustainable remedy," which would include "targeted removals" of sediment in problem areas coupled with community projects to improve quality of life along the river's edge.

The group says the EPA has not given adequate consideration to their plan or its underlying data, and that the Passaic's worst polluters, not among their ranks, have not come to the table. A spokesman for some of the other companies could not be reached for comment.

Wednesday's meeting was the second of three planned public meetings on the project, which is estimated to cost $1.7 billion and could take more than a decade to finish. Another hearing will be held in Belleville in June, and the Passaic River Institute is hosting a Q&A on June 2 to help explain details to local officials and residents.

"It is time after all these years to clean the river up," Wu said. "To give the river back to the people."