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The Record: Cleaning the Passaic

APRIL 15, 2014

THE RECORD

Polluted river can't be left for dead

FINALLY, AFTER decades of foot-dragging, after long and tortuous discussions involving private companies and political bureaucracies, after turf wars that have raged between and among politicians, it seems the lower Passaic River is going to get the thorough cleanup and remediation from pollution it so desperately needs.

As Staff Writer Scott Fallon reported last week, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency plans a massive cleanup of the lower eight miles of the Passaic, one of the most polluted waterways in the country. The project may take up to five years to complete, and it is projected to cost $1.7 billion. It also has bipartisan support, from Democratic members of Congress as well as the Republican administration of Governor Christie in Trenton.

Because of the extensive planning for the so-called "bank to bank" project, which calls for removing 4.3 million cubic yards of toxic mud from the bottom of the river from Newark Bay eight miles north to Belleville, the cleanup may be years away from starting. But start it must. As Judith Enck, EPA administrator for the region, told The Record, "you can't just leave a river for dead."

Of course, in a perfect world, we would like to see a more encompassing cleanup, since 17 miles of the river — from the bay to Dundee Dam in Garfield — is part of the federal Superfund site. As it is,

however, cleaning, really cleaning the lower eight miles is a good place to start.

As The Record reports, those miles for years too often served as a dumping ground for all manner of pollutants from scores of companies that thrived during the region's heavy industrial period after World War II. In accordance with the EPA plan, many of those companies, or companies that inherited liability from past polluters, will have to pay for the bulk of the cleanup, and they should.

EPA officials said they were targeting the lower eight miles because it contains roughly 90 percent of the contamination in the entire river — including the greatest concentration of cancer-causing dioxin, PCBs, mercury and other heavy metals. Once the contaminated sediment is removed, a protective cap of 2 feet of sand and 1 foot of materials to support habitat for fish and plants will be placed over the dredged area. The dredged material would be taken away by barge and eventually shipped by rail, then disposed of either by incinerator or by being placed in a landfill that carries toxic material.

Besides being the responsible thing to do, concerning the general population, not to mention the river's marine and plant life, the cleanup will serve a more immediate health need. Despite a three-decade-old ban on crabbing and an advisory against eating fish caught in the lower Passaic, many people, especially newer immigrants, still fish it, and they sometimes eat what they catch.

In the longer view, the EPA plan for the lower Passaic is a sensible one, a cleanup that should begin, after public input, as soon as feasible. The rehabilitation work going on in the Hudson River is proof that a turnaround for a long-neglected river can occur. The Passaic River's time has come.

CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/ The Passaic River near Newark.

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