

# Willamette

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last year that it would seek to add to its national Superfund list a five and one-half mile stretch of the lower Willamette River, which runs through Portland's northwest industrial area.

In the upper Willamette, running through Eugene about 160 river miles south of the proposed Superfund site, the environmental health of the river is not as bad, but experts aren't sure how good it is, said Dennis Wentz, the project chief for the United States Geological Survey's Willamette Basin Natural Water Quality Assessment Program.

"There's so many issues it is hard to say if [the quality] is better or worse," he said.

Chip Humphrey, a Superfund project manager for the EPA, said the Portland site could be officially added to the Superfund roster by July, but the agency would have to first receive a letter of concurrence from Governor John Kitzhaber and accept public comments. Industry in the area includes the Port of Portland ship maintenance plant, a rail-car factory and a chlorine production facility, Humphrey said.

Created in 1980 by an act of Congress, the Superfund list names the most environmentally damaged sites in the nation. These sites are a top priority for the federal agency to investigate and clean. Once the clean-up is done, polluters who created the problem foot the bill.

Department of Environmental Quality spokesman Jim Gladson said gauging the health of the Willamette is a tricky issue. In ar-

reas like Portland Harbor where there is a multitude of polluted sites left over from years of use by the shipping, ship-building and manufacturing industries, pollutants are easy to track back to a specific source.

But in the Eugene section of the Willamette River, where most of the pollutants are leached into the river from run-off and ground water, a specific polluter is difficult to find.

"What we are doing now is moving on to the next level of work, the unseen pollutants," Gladson said.

Improved detection technology is also finding new pollutants that were missed in earlier studies.

"The more we know, the more complex it gets," he said.

These pollutants have always been in the Willamette, Gladson said, but it is just now that they are being discovered. The new discoveries don't mean the river is getting sicker, he said, and in some ways it is healthier.

"People boat and swim in the river and there's fish," he said. "In the '50s and '60s whole areas of the river were devoid of life so in that sense the river has improved."

A U.S. Geological Survey's report on the water quality of the Willamette's tributaries from 1993 to 1995 found the fish communities and habitats of the river were degraded compared to other national sites, but the amount of pollutants was low to medium in comparison with the rest of the nation.

One way pollution reaches the

upper Willamette River is through groundwater tainted by pesticides and nitrates. Ross Penhallegon, an Oregon State University extension faculty member who serves on the Lane County Water Quality Advisory Group, which monitors groundwater in Lane County, oversaw testing in the area for pollution.

He said his group determined agricultural runoff wasn't responsible for the pollution. Penhallegon said he examined sam-

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U.S. Geological Survey  
project chief

ples from 20,000 agricultural sites in rural Lane County that were suspected to have been the source of pesticides, and discovered that only three sites had trace amounts.

The group then looked at possible sources for nitrates in ground water and found a close connection between concentrations of nitrates and septic tanks. Penhallegon said the levels of nitrates, which cause health problems, are under control, but he said he didn't know how long that would last.

"Groundwater is extremely good right now," he said. "But as we continue to put in septic systems and continue to make changes it will turn around and bite us in the future."

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