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Since the completion of the Big Pipe project in 2011, which stopped Portland's sewage from spilling into the Willamette River during rainstorms, there's been a movement led by Human Access Project to change the public's perception about swimming in the river. Events promoted by the nonprofit, like the annual Big Float and the opening of Poet's Beach in downtown Portland, are intended to encourage the public to swim and play in the often-snubbed waterway.

But is it really safe? Although E. coli counts are down, some areas are still highly contaminated. More than 100 years of industrial activity along the river has taken its toll — especially along the stretch of river between the Broadway Bridge and the Columbia Slough where the presence of PCBs, dioxins, heavy metals, pesticides and other toxic chemicals are known to lie in the sediment. In 2000 the EPA added the site to its National Priorities List and is expected to issue a final decision in 2017 about how it will be cleaned and who will have to pay for it.

To get to the bottom of whether or not it truly is safe to swim in the Portland Harbor, Street Roots asked several local experts the same question:

Is it safe to swim in the stretch of Willamette River that runs through Portland and to walk barefoot on the beaches alongside it?

**Portland Harbor Community Advisory Group**

"Generally I feel it is safe to swim in the Willamette River, and to walk barefoot on some beaches," says Jim Robison with the Portland Harbor Community Advisory Group. "I would not walk barefoot along the beach at Willamette Cove, or the Swan Island Lagoon. I would not want to swim in the Swan Island Lagoon, or near the sites of Gasco and Arkema (west side of the river just down stream and just upstream from the railroad bridge).

One other area of the river where I would avoid swimming or walking the beach barefoot (not that there is a beach) would be at River Mile 11, essentially the east side of the river from just north of the Fremont Bridge to just north of the Broadway bridge.

**Oregon Environmental Council**

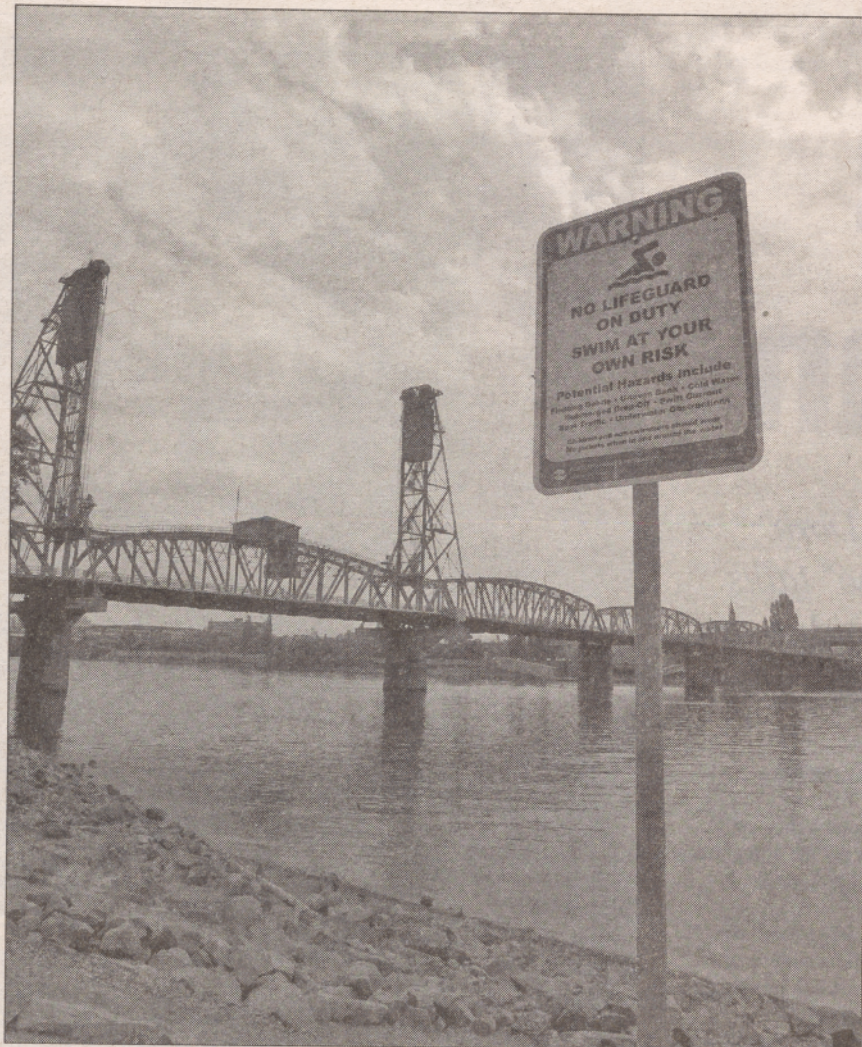
"Yes, it is safe to swim in the Willamette. The reason it is now safe to swim in is because the Portland Bureau of Environmental Services completed the 'Big Pipe,'" says Teresa Huntsinger. "Green stormwater facilities (the planted swales you see alongside streets) also play a huge part in making sure the system doesn't overflow. Yay! You can swim in the river without being exposed to fecal bacteria that can make you sick.

"Having said that, we still have a lot of work to do before the Willamette is clean and safe for the fish and wildlife that live in it. There are still toxic chemicals in the river that come from streets and cars, industrial plants, pesticides from farms and yards, and pharmaceuticals and other chemicals that make their way through wastewater treatment plants. These chemicals are at very low concentrations, so you would have to spend a lot of time in the water to be exposed to enough to cause harm. But the fish and other aquatic critters that spend their whole lives in the river are exposed to much more.

"Lastly, be aware that the Portland Harbor Superfund Site is on the northern, industrial end of the city. Even though most of the contamination is in the fish and sediment, why press your luck by swimming right in a Superfund site? Just to be on the safe side, I'd do my swimming and barefoot beach walking upstream of the Broadway Bridge; downtown Portland is fine."

**Portland Fire and Rescue**

"Safe' is so hard to define when it comes



STREET ROOTS PHOTO

# Safe to swim?

*With the renewed attention on swimming in the Willamette River, we asked the experts how safe it really is to go back into those murky waters*

to river safety," says Ron Ruse with Portland Fire and Rescue. "All swimmers need to be aware of their skills and limitations. And even though the temperature averages 70 degrees this time of year, it drops to 50 fairly quickly at night. Portland Fire and Rescue recommends that all swimmers know about the dangers of hypothermia and how to deal with it. Also, be aware of early signs of symptoms of heat exhaustion and dehydration in hot weather. And always wear a personal flotation device when in or around the river.

"You can reduce the threat of injury by wearing proper/protective footwear when on the beach. And don't forget to carry a first aid kit of some kind when on the beach."

**Environmental Protection Agency**

"EPA has determined that the greatest health risk from exposure to contamination in Portland Harbor is from eating resident fish and to infants that are breast-fed by mothers who eat resident fish on a regular basis," says Alanna Conley with the EPA.

"There are many chemical contaminants in the sediments, fish and shellfish at Portland Harbor, including PCBs and pesticides. Some of these chemicals don't break down and persist in the river sediments (mud). People may be exposed to these contaminants found in and along the river shoreline in various ways such as: recreational activities or working on the docks or shore, eating resident fish caught from the river (fish that spend their lifecycles in the harbor: i.e., catfish, bass and carp), or indirectly exposed through consuming breast milk from mothers who may have been exposed to contaminants from Portland Harbor."

**Willamette Riverkeepers**

"In general it is safe to swim and recreate in and on the Willamette River, with the rare exception these days of a combined sewer overflow in the Portland area," says Travis Williams with Willamette Riverkeepers. "The bigger issue is with the potentially chronic health impacts from consumption of some species of fish from the river. There are levels of both mercury and PCBs in some fish tissues that can impact people."

**Oregon Public Health Division**

"The Willamette River is not a regulated swimming site, so there may be bacteria and disease-causing germs that can occur in any outdoor water body," says Jonathan Modie. (See the City of Portland's website for results of monitoring the river for E. coli.)

"From the analysis that OHA has conducted within the Portland Harbor, chemical exposure in the river water is not a health concern. The contaminants associated with the Superfund site concentrate in the sediment at the bottom of the river and bioaccumulate in fish, not in the water itself. Contaminant levels in fish tissue can be 3.5 million times higher than what is in the water. This is why there is a fish advisory in place for resident harbor

fish.

"We do not have enough data on beaches within the downtown stretch to know whether walking barefoot poses a health hazard. We do know that within the Portland Harbor, two beaches were identified as posing health concerns: former Gasco Beach (a public health hazard due to polyaromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs), and Willamette Cove (an area of public health concern due to lead and dioxins).

"The downtown stretch of the Willamette River is a working marine port with motorized boat traffic. We caution to stay out of boat traffic areas when swimming."

**Oregon Department of Environmental Quality**

"From a water quality perspective it is safe to swim and recreate in the Willamette River in Portland most times of the year," says DEQ's Tom Gainer. "DEQ, the city of Portland and others monitor the Willamette River year-round for E. coli bacteria, an indicator of fecal contamination. Exposure to bacteria is the greatest health concern for people swimming or recreating in the river. Monitoring data from the past decade and from the City of Portland shows that bacteria rarely reach unhealthy levels in Portland. While water quality is safe for swimming, people should be aware of potential physical hazards on beaches and in shallow water, such as debris from historical activities, and understand the inherent risks with swimming in an urban waterway.

"The EPA's Portland Harbor Superfund project generally concluded that beaches in Portland Harbor are safe for recreational use, although DEQ and the Oregon Health Authority have noted that several specific areas should be avoided for frequent, long-term exposure due to localized contamination, such as the Willamette Cove, Gasco, and River Mile 13.1 beaches. River Mile 13.1 is located downtown (outside the Portland Harbor Superfund study area, conducted as a DEQ-lead investigation and clean up) just upstream of the east side of the Hawthorne Bridge (by the floating dock)."

**City of Portland Bureau of Environmental Services**

"Yes, it is safe to swim in this stretch of the Willamette River," says the bureau's Kim Cox. "In December 2011, Environmental Services completed a 20-year program to control combined sewer overflows (CSOs) and today the Willamette River is cleaner than ever. From May to

October, city staff collect weekly samples at five river recreational areas to track E. coli bacteria and temperature at public access points. Water quality monitoring for bacteria conducted by the City of Portland and Oregon Department of Environmental Quality show that bacteria levels are not a threat to human health. Even though Willamette River bacteria levels are low during dry weather, it's never safe to use water

directly from urban rivers and streams as a source of drinking water, because that water has not been treated to meet protective drinking water standards.

"In general, walking barefoot may not be the best idea because of potential physical hazards from stepping on debris. To date, the Oregon Health Authority, with two exceptions, has indicated that using the beaches in the Portland Harbor Superfund Site does not pose a threat. The two exceptions are the Gasco site and the east parcel of Willamette Cove."

**"There are still toxic chemicals in the river that come from streets and cars, industrial plants, pesticides from farms and yards, and pharmaceuticals and other chemicals that make their way through wastewater treatment plants. These chemicals are at very low concentrations, so you would have to spend a lot of time in the water to be exposed enough to cause harm."**