

# EPA/DEQ promise much, deliver little protection for river

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In a March meeting hosted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to offer an update on the imminent Proposed Plan for the Willamette River Superfund, the word "cost" came up numerous times. In fact, it was the only criteria cited by EPA as DEQ officials sat quietly and approvingly. The once-in-a-lifetime cleanup proposal for 11 miles of the lower Willamette is about to go to the public for 60 days of comment starting in April.

The mega-site, stretching from the Broadway Bridge to the Columbia River is one of the most contaminated sites in the nation. It is not safe for fishing or contact with shoreline sediments. Swimming is likely not safe everywhere in this area. Though EPA's mission is to protect human and environmental health, they cited only polluting businesses' feedback in choosing a plan that further de-emphasizes removal of carcinogenic persistent toxins. Instead, they propose to rely most heavily on doing nothing over 86 percent of the site. The meeting to update community representatives was short, condescending and angering to community members, many who have volunteered in the process since 2000.

It would be similar to acknowledging harmful toxic air in Portland yet only talking to polluting businesses about what they are willing to do about it. EPA's Plan would only



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ensure somewhat fewer toxins in our river over time – maybe. Instead of only being able to safely eat 8 ounces of fish such as crappie, bass or catfish per month, you might be able to take one more bite – maybe. If you are a pregnant woman or child you will not be able to eat any safely.

The do-nothing method favored by river industry and EPA, euphemistically called Monitored Natural Recovery (MNR), is known among the Community Advisory Group as "natural spreading." The method relies on the breaking down of contaminants over time, but the persistent pollutants in the river bottom sediments don't break down easily. In fact they have not done so over the last 100 years. Hence the Superfund listing. No one knows how long it will take PCBs (Polychlorinated biphenyls) spread all over the site to become neutral, possibly centuries. Other harmful contaminants, PAHs (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons), DDTs and dioxins and furans have been shown to be carcinogens. The equally toxic heavy metals simply don't

break down at all over time. Those include lead, cadmium, arsenic, mercury, asbestos, and zinc.

Like the air, the water is shared in the commons and falls under the Public Trust Doctrine. It's a concept of public resources being owned and shared by the public and it's been a part of our U.S. democracy from the beginning. Under the public trust, the common waters can never be controlled by or transferred to private interests for private purposes or gain. Our rights to use the river cannot be alienated or subordinated by our governments to special private interests (flowforwater.org). In the case of the Willamette, public uses have been impaired by a century of industrial dumping.

The cost of the cleanup will fall to businesses that have polluted and they are not small, local glass companies. Among the 150 polluting companies, there is Shell, BP, ExxonMobil, Chevron, Bayer Cropscience, Siltronic, Arkema, Schnitzer, Vigor, Gunderson to name a few. These alone have profits in the billions. The cost to effectively cleanup the mega-site has been estimated to be around 2 billion – over 20 years, split 150 ways and with the help of insurance. These companies have benefitted from damaging our common property, our river; yet EPA and DEQ have not shown the will to hold them accountable by proposing a cleanup that truly protects our health and that of the environment.

A weak proposed plan is especially

harmful to the most vulnerable among us who fish on the lower Willamette for food and as a cultural or family tradition. Those include minorities, houseless people and immigrants who may not know that fish such as catfish, crappie, carp and bass carry harmful carcinogens that have magnified as they've traveled up the food chain from small creatures living in the bottom of the river.

The river is the commons and should be safe for all users no matter their circumstances. The Community Advisory Group is asking that the cleanup result in fish no more contaminated than those in the rest of the Portland area. We need a cleanup plan that returns the commons safely to residents. A truly protective plan is a matter of equity. The advisors and other community partners are recommending another option that does that.

To learn more, all are welcome to attend a Community Forum on the Superfund sponsored by the Community Advisory Group on April 26, 2016, from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Portland Building Auditorium at 1120 SW 5th. There will be a rally at City Hall starting at 6 p.m. The EPA has declined to participate, but the Advisory's technical consultant, Dr. Peter deFur, will be present to explain the EPA Proposal in easy-to-understand terms and answer questions. Refreshments will be available.

For more information and updates see [PortlandHarborCAG.info](http://PortlandHarborCAG.info).



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