

Pollution in our commons: Time to speak out on river clean-up

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Threats to our health coming from the air and water have been exposed to the light of day. Agencies and leaders whose job it is to protect the community have been found to be lax in saying no to businesses who have treated our commons, the air and water, as their personal disposal system.

The chemical waste dumped in the lower Willamette River is no exception. Callous disregard for our community-owned river has resulted in 10 miles of disgustingly contaminated beaches and bottom sediments that are rife with hundreds of chemicals: DDTs, agent orange, also known as 2,4,5-T & 2,4-D, dioxin/furans, PAHs (Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons) from petroleum products and PCBs (Polychlorinated bipheyls) from insulation products, along with a host of toxic heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, mercury, arsenic and zinc. The toxins make any human or animal contact with river hotspots, sediments and resident fish or shellfish risky. It is one of the largest Superfund sites in the nation with 155 adjacent entities having likely responsibility. The pollution is made more acute by the fact that some of the contaminants do not break down easily or at all. The community, the largest stakeholder in the Superfund process and owner of the river, now has a chance to weigh in.

The proposed plan

On June 8, the Environmental Protection Agency announced its proposed plan for the cleanup of the lower Willamette, the 10 miles between the Broadway Bridge and the Columbia River. The announcement starts a 60-day public comment period which is the public's chance to be heard. The proposal includes a combination of methods: dredging, capping and so-called natural recovery (or more accurately, natural spreading). Unfortunately the proposal does

not remove enough persistent pollutants and leaves most of the site untouched (natural recovery/spreading) to wash contaminants downriver into the Columbia. It also has no known time frame for achieving cleanup goals.

The Community Advisory Group and other community stakeholders, such as The Audubon Society, both Willamette and Columbia Riverkeepers and the Yakama Nation all agree on one thing: EPA's Plan is not sufficient to achieve a healthy river and it does not promise fish as safe and edible immediately upriver, a primary goal for some community groups.

The equity equation for the lower Willamette gets even more unbalanced with the likelihood of a 14-acre toxic waste dump proposed at T-4 in St. Johns. The dump (don't be fooled by the euphemistic title, "Confined Disposal Facility") would be filled with contaminated dredge spoils and located in an earthquake and flood hazard zone. It would be separated from the river only by a permeable sand and dirt berm allowing contaminants to slowly leak back into the river, as the EPA admits. But they want us to look at the bright side: they chirpily announced that savings on dredge transport will keep costs below \$1 billion! A clear concession to politics, rather than good science or the safety of the community.

A mega-site such as the Willamette, with 13 hotspots which could each be an individual Superfund site, is going to be expensive to fix, likely more than \$1 billion.

The companies who damaged our river, among the largest in the world, have combined profits in the multi-billions and can afford an effective cleanup.

Nonetheless, a business subset known as the Lower Willamette Group, that includes the City of Portland and the Port of Portland, has indicated a likely lawsuit directed at EPA with a massive Freedom of Information Act Request for every email, report, recording and note since 2012 that have led to the clean-up plan. It's a ploy meant to intimidate, timed immediately

before the release of the proposal. It displays a sense of entitlement that is wholly inappropriate for publicly funded bodies, such as the city and the port, who purport to represent residents. They blatantly act against community interest in safe, healthy access to the river achieved only with an effective plan. In spite of a city study that concluded that every dollar spent on the Superfund site will result in well over a dollar return on investment, the city continues to act mostly on behalf of businesses who prefer to avoid paying to fix the river.

Community Advisory Group recommendations

The most important thing residents can do is offer feedback on the proposal. Residents, the largest stakeholder, have the ability to push the cleanup in a more effective direction. Check the Community Advisory Group website, PortlandHarborCAG.info or EPA's website for the proposed plan summary. There are also hard copies at the Central and St. Johns libraries. Feedback can be given online either at the EPA or Yakama Nation websites.

The advisory will be writing and posting a response to the plan on our website as will our consultant, Dr. Peter deFur. The advisory group recommends a plan with less reliance on "natural recovery" (aka, natural spreading) and instead encourages an option we call G+, not listed in the feasibility study, that includes 1,000 acres of dredging and will achieve goals within a known time frame. We want a plan that results in fish that are as safely edible as those immediately upriver. This is a mega-site, 10 miles long, one of the largest and most complex in the nation and should be dealt with effectively. The potentially responsible parties are able to afford to fix what they've damaged and residents require safety when accessing the river and catching fish.

Barbara Quinn is a member of the Portland Harbor Community Advisory Group

PUBLIC FORUMS AND EVENTS

The EPA is hosting community hearings to gather feedback from residents. See their website or the Community Advisory's at PortlandHarborCAG.info for times and places.

■ June 21, 7-9 p.m., the Community Advisory Group is hosting a public forum at Harriet Tubman School at 2231 N. Flint. All are welcome. Dr. Peter deFur will explain the proposed plan in understandable terms. There will be a question and answer session with panelists. Avenues for feedback to the EPA will be shared.

■ June 30, 6-9 p.m., The Portland City Council hosts a public hearing at University of Portland's Bauccio Commons at 5000 N. Willamette Blvd. also with panelists.

■ July 31, noon to 7 p.m., the Willamette River Festival hosted by the Community Advisory and St. Johns Main Street Coalition on the Cathedral Park waterfront. There will be live music, food vendors, a boat launching, environmental fair, walking tours, and feedback methods



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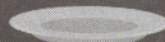
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