

A sewer runs through it

*The Willamette
River in the
21st century*

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STAFF REPORT

The Willamette waterfront is many things to many people – a place to sleep, a food source, a wildlife habitat, a place to swim and for others, a place to dump industrial waste.

An Oregonian report from 1906 called the river a “common sewer for the entire valley,” and after a state official reported typhoid germs in the river that year, the Oregonian suggested that readers should “cultivate the gentle art of keeping their mouths closed while in the water.” In 1885 the city of Portland formed a committee to find water less polluted by sewers and pulp and paper mills, and by 1895 the first water from Bull Run was flowing into the city.

The Willamette River became a “National Priority Site” for toxic waste removal in 2000, with the EPA putting polluters on notice that they would be paying for a clean-up under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act of 1980 (CERCLA). The river is currently a Superfund site (a CERCLA designation) for 10 miles between the Broadway Bridge and Kelley Point Park, and advocates say the number of seriously contaminated areas actually represent a “Mega-Superfund”, with at least 13 high-priority sites the EPA has studied as a single project. Polluted sites adjacent to the river, whose run-off could lead to re-contamination, are managed by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, and are considered “early action” clean-up areas.

Many polluting companies have pushed for a quick and cheap clean-up of the river. And according to advocates close to the process, those companies most responsible for the pollution have had an excessive influence over the decision-making process that’s shaped the clean-up plan. Unless that changes, the future of the Willamette River could be decided by the same people who turned it into a toxic stew, pushing off all other relationships to the river – including those based on fishing or recreation – back into the margins for another hundred years.

After 16 years of studies, the public is finally being asked to influence their future river. The EPA released its draft clean-up plan June 8, kicking off a 60-day comment period that asks the public whether the EPA plan does enough for the river and the people relying on it.

A century of poison has made the Willamette one of the most polluted rivers in the United States – it contains at least 65 chemicals that risk human and environmental health, according to the EPA, including petroleum, poly-chlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), pesticides like DDT, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, and heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, arsenic, mercury, asbestos and zinc.

The diversity of pollutants has led to a complex clean-up plan, involving a mix of capping, dredging, and “monitored natural recovery.”

The EPA has sent letters to the Lower Willamette Group – the group of polluters actively cooperating with the EPA. In response to the EPA’s superfund listing, 10 of the parties listed as “potentially responsible” by EPA

signed an agreement to pay for a feasibility study for the potential clean-up. Four others have contributed funds for the effort, and combined form the Lower Willamette Group, including the Port of Portland and the city of Portland.

In 2013 the group of 14 “potentially responsible parties” was fined \$125,000 for failing to adequately address the human health risks of river pollutants in an assessment originally released in 2009. EPA determined the report had “several instances of incorrect or misleading information” which had not been changed despite numerous warnings. In June 2012, the Lower Willamette Group was notified that it would be fined up to \$5,000 a day until its report was fixed. After fighting with the EPA for the better part of a year and accruing fines in excess of \$1 million, the group finally submitted an acceptable assessment in early 2013, then expressed shock and outrage to find itself stuck with a reduced fine of \$125,000.

EPA’s Proposed Cleanup Plan for the Portland Harbor Superfund Site presents EPA’s preferred alternative or option to lower risks to people and the environment from contamination in the lower Willamette River and its river banks. Alternative I, EPA’s preferred alternative, reduces risks to human health and the environment to acceptable levels by dredging and/or capping 291 acres of contaminated sediments and 19,472 lineal feet of contaminated river bank, followed by 23 years of monitored natural recovery. The preferred alternative also includes disposal of dredged sediment in both an on-site confined disposal facility and upland landfills. This

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