



PESTICIDES • DIOXIN • LEAD • ARSENIC • PCBs

# Cleaning Up Our Toxic River

CANOEING • WATERSKIING

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## AN OVERVIEW OF THE CLEAN-UP REPORT

*Unsafe levels of toxic chemicals lie along the bottom of the Willamette River downstream of Oregon City. DEQ is proposing to lead the clean-up of the most industrialized section (6 miles between Swan and Sauvie Islands), called the Portland Harbor, in order to avoid its designation as a federal Superfund site.*

### Introduction

The Portland Harbor Sediment Management Plan is designed to develop a framework for the State of Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to clean up sediment contamination in a section of the Willamette River known as the Portland Harbor. In the fall of 1997, DEQ and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) studied levels of toxic contaminants in the Portland Harbor. Based on the results, which were released in 1998, EPA has proposed the Portland Harbor be considered for listing as a Superfund Site. DEQ requested that EPA delay its decision on listing the Portland Harbor for six months in order to develop a state-led plan to avoid listing the harbor as a Superfund site.

The Portland Harbor consists of a 6-mile stretch of the Willamette River from approximately Swan Island to Sauvie Island. DEQ has prepared a report to demonstrate why EPA should allow the state to handle the study and clean up of the harbor area. The report also makes references to work that DEQ would do elsewhere in the 26 miles of the Lower Willamette River downstream of Oregon City to its confluence with the Columbia River. (The report refers to this larger area of the river as "harbor-wide.") DEQ, the Portland Harbor Group, and other agencies developed the report. The Portland Harbor Group has 10 entities, including the City of Portland, the Port of Portland, and businesses that own or conduct business in the 6-mile area.

A draft version of the Report was released on April 19, 1999 and is open for public comment until May 19, 1999. On June 29, 1999 a Regional Decision Team will review the report and determine whether the Portland Harbor should be listed as a Superfund site or the state should be allowed to manage the study and clean-up process.

### The Report

DEQ's report has three major components to address toxic contamination in the Portland Harbor:

1. DEQ oversight of at least 17 sites along the river where toxic contamination is known to exist. DEQ will work with the "responsible parties"—property owners who are responsible for the contamination at their property site—to develop plans to clean up these sites.
2. DEQ will assess toxic contamination in the sediment of the 26 miles of the Lower Willamette River from Oregon City to the confluence with the Columbia River.
3. DEQ will conduct a series of research activities, not specific to any one site or clean-up but crucial to implementing the Report. These activities include:
  - Developing sediment quality guidelines since none exist. These guidelines will be used to decide how clean to get the Portland Harbor.

- Selecting “reference sites”—sites that may represent “natural” areas or areas not influenced by contamination from the Portland Harbor industries—to be used for comparison purposes in analyzing the toxic contamination data.
- Developing “human and wildlife target tissue levels”—to identify how much toxic contamination is acceptable in fish tissue to protect people and wildlife if the fish are eaten.
- Developing “fish tissue screening concentrations”—to identify a safe level of toxic contamination allowed in fish tissue to protect the health of “most” fish.
- Developing a “harbor-wide biota-sediment bioaccumulation function”—to relate sediment toxic contamination levels to tissue toxic contamination levels for bioaccumulating contaminants. “Bioaccumulating contaminants” are chemicals that build up in the tissue of living organisms and move up the food chain.

All these guidelines will be used to determine the risk posed to human health, wildlife, and fish from toxic chemicals. The report contains few details about how these guidelines will be developed, to what degree the public will be allowed to participate in their development, and what kind of information will be used to ensure that the guidelines protect human health and the environment now and in the future.

## Superfund or DEQ’s Approach?

From DEQ’s perspective, the advantages of its approach to cleaning up the Portland Harbor include:

- Building on existing DEQ work.
- Keeping the project under “local control.”
- Achieving the same or better environmental results as Superfund listing.
- Moving faster to assess the contamination and carry out needed actions to protect the environment and human health.

- Using Oregon clean-up laws that cover petroleum products
- Avoiding EPA leadership that may be less open to involvement by local industry and local agencies.

The advantages of EPA’s use of Superfund resources to clean up the Portland Harbor include:

- Building on existing work by DEQ and other state and federal agencies.
- Oversight of the project by an agency that is not influenced by local politics or industry.
- The same or better environmental results, including using the Clean Water Act to protect the Columbia River Estuary from toxic chemicals.
- Greater legal protection for the environment from the damaging effects of dredging.
- EPA’s greater experience in managing and cleaning up large and complex toxic waste sites.
- Better mechanisms to involve federal fish and wildlife agencies and to learn from scientists across the country.
- The use of federal funds to pay for the cost of cleaning of the Portland Harbor.
- Better coordination with agencies in charge of protecting species on the verge of extinction, such as Willamette and Columbia River salmon and steelhead.

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**NORTHWEST ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCATES**  
 133 SW SECOND AVE., SUITE 302  
 PORTLAND, OR 97204-3526  
 Tel: 503/295-0490 Fax: 503/295-6634  
[www.advocates-nwea.org](http://www.advocates-nwea.org)  
 e-mail: [nwea@advocates-nwea.org](mailto:nwea@advocates-nwea.org)