



PESTICIDES • DIOXIN • LEAD • ARSENIC • PCBs

Cleaning Up Our Toxic River

CANOEING • WATERSKIING

FISHING • SWIMMING • BOATING • DRINKING • BIRDING

PORTLAND HARBOR & WATER QUALITY

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.

Toxics on the River Bottom

Unlike some kinds of pollution that simply wash away, toxic chemicals often attach themselves to small particles of soil at the bottoms of rivers. These contaminated sediments move downstream, accumulating in areas where water flows are slowed and where beaches form. They move more quickly when storms and waves from ships, dredging, and construction work flush them out. On the river bottom, the contaminated sediments are eaten by bottom-dwelling fish such as carp and sturgeon. They are also consumed by small river-bottom insects that are food for fish which, in turn, are caught by people, birds, and animals such as mink, otter, and seals.

Cleaning Up Polluted Waters

The Clean Water Act requires the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to clean up all of Oregon's contaminated rivers, streams, and lakes. Sued by Northwest Environmental Advocates after 25 years of failing to follow the law, the DEQ has prepared a ten-year schedule to clean up all of the state's polluted waters. Unbelievably, DEQ has put the Willamette River at the end of this schedule. Without these Clean Water Act clean-up plans, DEQ will not know the degree to which contaminated sediments in the Portland Harbor must be cleaned up to protect water quality in the Willamette and Columbia Rivers.

Oregon's History of Neglect

In recent years, Oregon has launched a number of committees, task forces, reports, and studies to address the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. Despite the talk and expenditure of tax dollars, it has done almost nothing to actually protect and restore the Willamette River. In 1995, a DEQ study showed that 23% of fish at the Newberg Pool had skeletal abnormalities but DEQ chose not take samples to determine which chemicals were causing the fish to be deformed. Now, years later, DEQ still does not know what is causing the deformities, where the pollution comes from, how much pollution is in the river, and what effect it is having on people, fish, and wildlife.

Toxic Facts

- For years, DEQ has known that the Willamette River has unsafe levels of dioxin, arsenic, chromium, copper, lead, zinc, and DDT. With the partial exception of dioxin, DEQ has taken no steps to reduce these toxic chemicals in the Willamette as required by the Clean Water Act.
- Toxic chemicals have caused severe health impacts to fish and wildlife both upstream and downstream of the Portland Harbor. River otter in the Lower Columbia River have abnormally small penises. Mink in the area have high levels of toxic chemicals in their liver and seem to have all but disappeared. Lower

Columbia bald eagles have suffered reproductive failure. Willamette River fish in the Newberg Pool have skeletal abnormalities.

- DEQ's plan does not consider the need for clean-up of the Portland Harbor to protect the health of people, fish, birds, and mammals downstream in the Lower Columbia River.
- The Multnomah Channel—which runs along the west side of Sauvie Island—has never been studied and, although some scientists believe it may be very contaminated, DEQ has not included it in the Portland Harbor clean-up proposal.
- The DEQ report states that if contamination is found throughout the river that poses risks, it “may” warrant remediation. But, DEQ has already decided to do nothing about river-wide contamination.

The Portland Harbor Plan

DEQ's report about cleaning up the toxic sediments in the Portland Harbor is vague. The report makes a few references to the Clean Water Act's requirement that unsafe levels of pollution be cleaned up but nowhere does DEQ say it will use this requirement to make the river safe. The DEQ report does not address Portland's contribution of toxic chemicals to the contamination of the Columbia River Estuary downstream. And, while DEQ agrees any contamination it finds outside the 6-mile zone must be addressed, it will not include those areas in this clean-up effort.

Conclusions

DEQ is largely ignoring the role of the Clean Water Act in cleaning up the Portland Harbor. The result:

- DEQ will avoid cleaning up all parts of the Willamette River with unsafe levels of toxic chemicals.
- DEQ will ignore how the Portland Harbor is contaminating the Columbia River Estuary where toxic chemicals are harming birds and mammals such as the bald eagles and river otter.
- DEQ will not stop pollution before it enters the Willamette.
- Oregon will continue its poor track record of protecting the health of people, birds, fish, and mammals.
- DEQ's report does not establish how it will protect salmon and other species on the verge of extinction from the risks posed by toxic chemicals.



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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
 e-mail: nwea@advocates-nwea.org