Housatonic River

Healing process

Thirteen years after the PCB cleanup began, criticisms have decreased but still exist. Next up: new tests and Rest of River.

By Trevor Jones
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PITTSFIELD

In the heart of the city, the scars are healing.

In 1999, crews and heavy equipment converged on the Housatonic River to begin what would become an eight-year, $100 million cleanup of PCBs in a two-mile section of the river south of General Electric Co.'s former 250-acre Morningside plant.

Thirteen years later, criticism of the stone armoring and barren banks that lined the river as restoration proceeded has largely subsided as nature slowly recaptures its former state. The 7,000 trees and shrubs planted along the banks continue to mature, while the risk of PCBs to humans and wildlife has been dramatically reduced.

"As time goes on, there's more realization that it just took a bit of time for the restoration to kick in," said Dean Tagliaferro, EPA project manager for the cleanup of the first two miles, where the probable cancer-causing chemicals were released from GE's facility.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, were used by GE in manufacturing transformers in Pittsfield between 1932 and 1977. Most uses of the chemical were banned by the federal government the year GE discontinued its use.

The most recent tests of the two-mile section, completed in 2007, show a 99 percent reduction in PCBs, and a nearly equal reduction in the risk to the food chain and flow of contaminants downstream.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will return to the river this month or next to conduct the latest round of tests on the site, knowing that some criticisms still exist as the next phase of the cleanup, the so-called Rest of River, begins to take shape.

"There are obviously some people who would still have some concerns about it for this stretch of the river [the first two miles] ... but we still think it was the right approach," Tagliaferro said.

The EPA estimates that 110,000 cubic yards of sediment and soil were removed. The work was split into two phases: the halfmile removal, which extended between the Newell and Lyman street bridges, and the 1

1⁄2-mile removal, which extends from the Lyman Street bridge to the confluence of the east and west branches at Fred Garner Park. The first phase was conducted by GE, with oversight from the state and EPA. The second phase was done by the EPA, and the cost was split between the agency and GE. Both projects were agreed upon through a consent decree between GE and various federal, state and city agencies that guides the cleanup of the river and other sites associated with the company's PCB contamination.

Photos by Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle Staff

The confluence of the east and west branches of the Housatonic River at Fred Garner Park in Pittsfield, above, marks the end of the cleanup of the first two miles of the river. Hathaway Street resident Mert Amuso, top, had cleanup crews in and around his property for years. He called the process 'sometimes pleasant and sometimes very unpleasant.'

The two cleanups presented challenges, with the remediation of the half-mile seen as more of a containment project because the contamination was so deep, while the majority of PCBs in the 1

1⁄2- mile stretch were able to be taken out because they were in the first two to three feet of sediment.

There also were problems with staging the cleanup with limited river access because of the commercial and residential properties abutting the river and the need to adequately armor the banks to avoid slides that would eat into residential and commercial properties.

Michael Gorski, western regional director for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, called the work "an incredible engineering feat," especially noting the ability to channelize the river during the work.

He also praised the painstaking effort to restore the riverbed to promote healthy wildlife conditions.

"The methods that they chose and the restoration they put in place really fit," Gorski said.

And so far, the stone armoring that often was derided before vegetation set in has done its job, even standing up to major weather events such as Tropical Storm Irene, which surged through the Berkshires last summer.

GE officials weren't available to speak last week, but a company spokesman said in a statement that the first two miles are proof that cooperation works.

"GE worked cooperatively with EPA in the first two miles of the Housatonic River and at the Pittsfield facility to dramatically reduce the amount of PCBs entering Rest of River," wrote Andrew Williams, the GE spokesman.

Hathaway Street resident Mert Amuso had cleanup crews in and around his property for years. (Amuso's property also was entirely excavated as part of a separate GE agreement with the state).

Amuso's backyard extends into the river, and he remembers watching the soil removal amid a steady stream of noise coming from the construction site. He said the river was largely a dumping ground before the cleanup, especially along the Lyman Street bridge, which was adjacent to his property. And while he wishes there hadn't been a need to do work in the first place, Amuso said he couldn't be happier with the return of the river to a more natural state.

"It was sometimes pleasant and sometimes very unpleasant, but we all got through it," he said.

Mayor Daniel L. Bianchi said the project created considerable inconveniences for impacted homeowners and caused traffic headaches, but the final result is pleasing.

"At the end of the day, I think a good job was done," Bianchi said. "It [vegetation] is starting to grow in and look very natural."

But the project isn't without critics. Some environmental-ists wish more had been removed — it's unclear how much contaminated soil remains in place, especially in the half-mile — and they also take issue with the decision to hold off on cleaning Silver Lake and Unkamet Brook, which continue to feed PCBs into the first two miles.

(Tagliaferro said the number of PCBs from those sources are minimal and the decision to focus on the first two miles was based on the desire to give a more immediate response to property owners along this section of the river.) The river in the first two miles begins in a largely industrial section of the city off East Street, much of which was channelized by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1940s. But as it moves south, it begins encroaching on the backyards of residents.

George Darey, chairman of the state Fish and Wildlife Board, said parts of the first two miles used to be good for fishing and natural habitat, but it's no longer that way.

"What they've done is made a drainage ditch out of it and completely ruined the character of the river," Darey said.

The EPA also continues to come under fire for storing the removed contaminants at two landfills near Allendale Elementary School.

The EPA's plan for the next phase of the cleanup is expected to be released this summer. Rest of River corresponds to the remaining 135 miles of the Housatonic south of the confluence, which continues from Pittsfield, through Connecticut and into the Long Island Sound.

The EPA hasn't given a timetable for that work, but the agency last month said it's considering removing 10 times the sediment and soil that what was taken out of the first two miles. The EPA also said the majority of work will take place in a 10-mile stretch between Fred Garner Park and Woods Pond dam in Lenox.

And as stakeholders continue to advocate for various levels of cleanup in the meandering and ecologically sensitive Rest of River, it's clear that the work done in the first two miles helped shape public opinion on the remediation that lies ahead.

Nat Karns, executive director of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, said the firestorm that surrounded the PCB landfills in Pittsfield probably led to the near unanimity — with the exception of GE — that contaminants be taken to out-of-state facilities going forward.

"That kind of was a wake-up call," Karns said. "It energized the region as a whole in being adamant having no more landfills being created."

Tim Gray, executive director of the Housatonic River Initiative, a group that has spent decades advocating for the removal of as many PCBs as possible, described the first two miles as "a total environmental disaster" before the remediation. Gray said the work performed there is a model for restoration efforts.

"The cleanup worked, and it shows that the river can be restored," he said. "It points to the fact that this next section of the cleanup can be done and done right."

River advocates such as Darey, however, fretted for years that the techniques used in the first two miles would be repeated in the next phase, much of which flows through a state- designated Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

But Darey said he was encouraged by the EPA's recent announcement that it was working with the state to minimize the impact on the habitat through its cleanup plan.

"This is like a breath of fresh air," Darey said.

Federal and state environmental officials say it's inappropriate to compare the disparate river sections. But GE, which for years resisted any major cleanup of the river, is evoking what it calls "cooperation that worked in the first two miles" for the Rest of River. The company says it has been shut out of negotiations as it seeks "a common sense solution."

"A more collaborative approach," Williams wrote, "is the best way to prevent years of conflict and delay."

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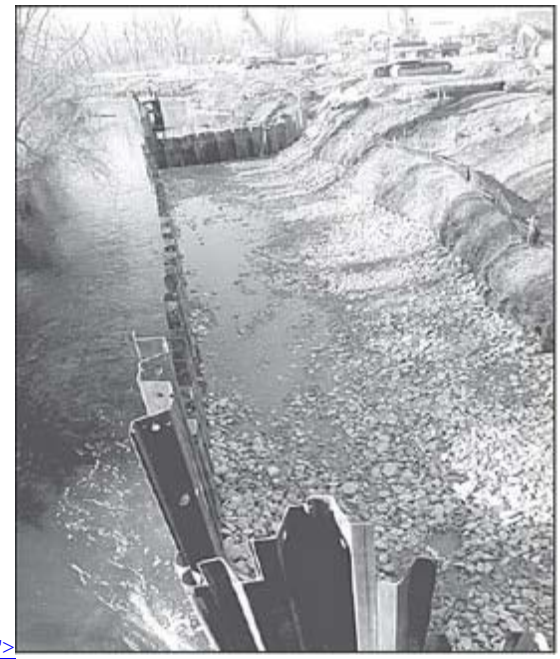

Eagle file photos

The Housatonic River cleanup: a view from the Newell Street bridge in Pittsfield at the start of the first half-mile in 1999, top, and near the Elm Street bridge in 2004, above.

Remediation of the first two miles was completed in 2007.