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Fox River cleanup leads to PCBs disposal quandary

Residents don't want toxins in landfill; firm says it's safe

By LEE BERGQUIST

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Green Bay residents have long demanded that the companies responsible for PCB contamination on the lower Fox River clean it up.

But now as work is starting on the biggest cleanup project of its kind in the country, the public is adamant: Don't dump the most contaminated spoils in a local landfill.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is expected to decide by Saturday whether to approve a proposal by Georgia-Pacific to use a company-owned landfill to bury the most highly toxic waste.

The company touts the site as a common-sense place to bury the contaminants. It is already a licensed landfill for sludge and boiler ash that come from two Georgia-Pacific plants in Green Bay. The landfill is also licensed to take in PCBs - having done so without incident in 1999 for a demonstration cleanup project, the company says.

But parties ranging from west-side neighbors to the Oneida Nation - whose property is next to the landfill - to the mayor of Green Bay say they don't want to see polychlorinated biphenyls scraped

from the bottom of the Fox and buried there.

"You could probably throw a football at it if you had a good arm," said Bobbi Webster, a spokeswoman for the tribe, referring to the landfill's proximity. In truth, even Brett Favre couldn't throw a ball that far, but there is no disputing the fact that the Oneida's casino and hotel are located next to Georgia-Pacific's landfill on the south. The tribe is opposed to the landfill on environmental grounds, but Webster said that its very presence - and contents - wouldn't be good for business.

Green Bay Mayor Jim Schmitt is among many local officials who want the DNR and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to slow down, just a bit, until a more suitable location can be found.

Both agencies have to approve the proposal.

"We are not supporting putting PCBs on the west side of the city," Schmitt said.

So far, only one person has filed favorable comments on the project from the public, said Len Polczinski, a waste program manager for the DNR.

At issue is where and how to dispose of the most toxic concentrations of PCBs from portions of the 39-mile lower Fox - a cleanup project that is just beginning, will cost up to \$800 million and could take a decade to complete.

The flap is only the latest of myriad issues over the cleanup of a river that has long received waste from the largest concentration of paper mills in the world.

Among others:

The companies responsible for the pollution have not signed final agreements spelling out their responsibility for cleaning up the river, said Greg Hill, coordinator of the cleanup for the DNR.

Officials also have not figured out where to dispose of less toxic waste from the cleanup. One controversial proposal to build a pipeline from the river to a landfill site in the Town of Holland in Brown County is "still in the mix," Hill said. No final decision on it has been made.

Also, there are still questions whether some polluted sediments of the river could remain and be capped, instead of removing them.

Don't eat the fish

PCBs are a family of 209 related chemical compounds that were once widely used in manufacturing, including the production of carbonless paper. The chemicals have been shown to affect the reproductive function and immune system in humans. They also are associated with a greater risk of cancer, and in Wisconsin, regulators have long issued health advisories for the

river to limit consumption of fish.

Currently, the only waste sites in the Midwest that are licensed under the Toxic Substances Control Act to accept waste with elevated levels of PCBs - those of more than 50 parts per million - are companies that build their own landfills and a commercial landfill in suburban Detroit.

Georgia-Pacific is offering the use of its landfill for 20,000 cubic yards of high-level PCBs that are located below a dam in De Pere and are targeted for expedited removal. Testing of those sediments showed concentrations of PCBs that were up to 3,000 times higher than acceptable levels.

The PCBs were so high, Polczynski said, that the DNR and the EPA prodded two companies - NCR Corp. and U.S. Paper Mills Corp. and parent Sonoco - to start cleaning it up by May 2007.

High PCB levels are expected to be found in other pockets of the river as well, including sediments of PCBs that originated with Georgia-Pacific. The company's proposal would take up to 200,000 cubic yards of the most polluted waste, or about 400 million pounds. Georgia-Pacific says it has spent more than \$35 million on cleanup of the river so far.

Nearby residents protest

That is not something that Tom Vincent of Green Bay finds very appealing. He moved into his home three years ago in a neighborhood where values of houses routinely exceed \$500,000.

"Nobody wants this stuff around here," said Vincent, who is one of the leaders of a newly formed group of more than 200 people fighting the proposal.

The landfill, for example, is built on a historic wetland, and they worry that the PCBs and other pollutants will eventually leak into the groundwater.

The Village of Hobart, which also abuts the project, says the DNR and the EPA need to look for a better place to dump the most toxic PCBs.

Other options: Neighbors would like to see the PCBs with the elevated concentrations sent to Michigan, or perhaps deposited in the Town of Holland.

There is also talk of burning the PCBs - a process called vitrification, which would turn the material into a glasslike substance. Schmitt, the Green Bay mayor, dismissed the technology, however, saying that it has "little traction" among policy-makers.

But Rich Heidel, Hobart village president and an engineer by training, said that, "at the end of the day, I do have confidence that technology, if done right, can take care of this."

Al Toma, government affairs manager for Georgia-Pacific, said moving the waste to a landfill in

Michigan would be more expensive, adding up to \$20 million to cost of the cleanup.

The appeal of the company's proposal, he said, is that the waste would be located in an engineered landfill with built-in protections, such as an impermeable liner to guard against migrating PCBs below the ground. The landfill is already permitted to accept PCBs, and he says it has a good environmental track record.

"There are going to be 200,000 yards coming from that river," he said, "and it's going to have to go somewhere."

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