

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

Who will get the big bill to clean Assabet River?

DEP targets Assabet pollution

By Jacqueline Reis, T&G Staff

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State environmental officials last night outlined how towns and wastewater plants along the Assabet River can clean up the river water. But the million-or-more-dollar question remains: Who will pay for the work?

The state Department of Environmental Protection held a public forum at Marlboro High School about what is essentially a pollution budget for the Assabet, which starts in the Westboro area and joins the Concord River in Concord. The pollutant in this case is phosphorus, which comes from the wastewater treatment plants, runoff and other nonpoint sources and from sediment at the bottom of the river. According to the draft study presented last night, called a total maximum daily load study, phosphorus levels will not approach federal guidelines unless the amount of phosphorus being produced by the sediment is cut by 90 percent.

"Quite frankly, one of the uncertainties here is whether we can ever get to 90 percent reduction of the sediment," said Dennis "Rick" Dunn, who presented the report with Russell A. Isaac. Both are environmental engineers with the DEP.

The study also calls for wastewater treatment plants along the river to reduce the amount of phosphorus they discharge into the river. For instance, the Westboro plants, which also serve Shrewsbury, would have to reduce its phosphorus output to 0.1 mg/ , according to the draft. The draft TMDL study the DEP presented last night proposes a two-phased approach to improving the Assabet's water quality. In Phase 1, communities would reduce phosphorus discharges to 0.1 mg/ at the major wastewater plants by 2009 and study river sediment or dam-removal options by 2007. In Phase 2, communities if feasible, would reduce the phosphorus the sediment is producing or, if that isn't feasible, implement tighter restrictions on the wastewater discharges by 2014.

Six communities with wastewater plants along the Assabet - Hudson, Marlboro, Maynard, Northboro, Shrewsbury and Westboro - formed the Assabet Consortium in 1999 to work together toward new discharge permits for their facilities. A draft letter from the consortium communities to the DEP and federal Environmental Protection Agency states that the communities do not consider the treatment plant permitting process to be tied to the sediment study. However, the communities "tentatively" agree to reduce total phosphorus discharge levels to 0.1 mg/ in conjunction with a sediment remediation study to be done by the Army Corps of Engineers with the local portion of the study's cost, 35 percent, to be paid by the consortium communities if they decide the study recommendations are "cost effective and feasible."

The letter was still only a draft last night.

Julia Blatt, executive director of the Concord-based Organization for the Assabet River, said last night that the Army Corps of Engineers does not have any money for studies in the next fiscal year. OAR has met with Massachusetts congressmen and senators, and the legislators said they would support the project, she said.

"Certainly everyone that's involved should give them a phone call," Mr. Dunn said of the congressional delegation.

The DEP's total maximum daily load draft report for the Assabet is available online at www.mass.gov/dep/brp/wm/tmdls.htm. The agency is accepting public comment on it until April 15. Written comments should be sent to Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Watershed Management, 627 Main St., Second Floor, Worcester, MA 01608, Attn: Brian Friedmann, or brian.friedmann@state.ma.us.

The DEP will send the report to the EPA for review before it is implemented. The goal is to make the river suitable for fishing and swimming, habitable for aquatic animals and give it "good aesthetics," according to the DEP.