

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT



EPA-New England Daily News Clips

11007

Thursday, January 21, 1999

Providence Journal
1/21/99

EPA steps up response to river dioxin findings

■ The federal agency will release \$1 million in emergency funds to protect the public while a longer-term plan for dealing with the Woonasquatucket River's problems is drawn up.

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Amid growing demands for swift action on the Woonasquatucket River's pollution woes, the Environmental Protection Agency pledged \$1 million yesterday for more tests along the river, more protective fences, and more meetings with the public.

The money was released by the EPA's Washington headquarters and drawn from a special fund for emergency cleanups.

At least some of the work that the new money will finance would have been done anyway, an EPA official said. But the release of emergency money signals that the river's taint has risen to the radar screens of EPA officials in the nation's capital.

In an interview yesterday, EPA chief Carol M. Browner said that the money locks the agency into a broader review of health risks that could eventually lead to a cleanup.

"We, working with the state, will absolutely do what is necessary," Browner said by phone yesterday from Washington. "This emergency-response money allows us and the state to get the kind of sampling we need to move us toward an emergency action plan."

Since announcing last week that high levels of dioxin were found along the urban river's North Providence leg, the agency has been hustling to calm residents' fears about the poisonous chemical.

The announcement yesterday was embraced by local officials and an environmental group as an important step. But experts say that many more millions of dollars will be necessary should officials decide to mop up contamination along the Woonasquatucket, which meanders through a working-class section of North Providence that once bustled with factories and mills.

"This [money] isn't going to clean it up," said Sen. John H. Chafee, who was tipped off to yesterday's announcement during a chance encounter with Browner at the president's State of the Union address Tuesday night. "But it's an absolutely necessary first step."

Aimee Tavares, the director of Rhode Island Clean Water Action, an environmental group that has blasted the EPA's earlier handling of the dioxin problems, lauded the emergency funds, but said she hoped it was more than window dressing.

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"This shouldn't be paying for what they already said they were going to do," she said. "This should be paying for additional testing, additional outreach." Meanwhile, a committee charged with mapping plans for more tests will meet for the first time today, at noon in North Providence Town Hall. The Management Action Committee, as it is called, is chaired by Mayor A. Ralph Mollis and the EPA's local coordinator, Tom Condon. Its meeting is open to the public.

Although unhealthful levels of dioxin were found in the river's fish as far back as 1996, public concern rocketed last week when the EPA announced that troubling dioxin levels had been found in recent tests of riverbank sediment and soil. Those levels were as high as 14 times EPA safety limits.

Scientists say that dioxin — a cancer-causing byproduct of industrial processes, such as paper bleaching, that use chlorine — is harmful to humans only after long exposure to large quantities. Eating fish from the river is dangerous, scientists say, but canoeing there is not.

In a few days, the EPA will complete a double check of its test results and send them to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, an arm of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The registry will use the tests to assess the extent of any public-health threat. Its results are due next month.

If there is a threat, the EPA will lay the groundwork for a cleanup, which could begin as early as April, said EPA spokesman Peyton Fleming.

But Fleming declined to say what his agency would do if the registry finds no health risk. Agency officials did not return phone calls yesterday.

The degree of public danger remains an open question, and one to which local politicians have been clamoring for answers.

A state Health Department study last week found that cancer levels near the river were lower than the state average.

And one of the EPA's top dioxin experts, when told yesterday of the river's dioxin levels, said she doubted many people had been exposed to harmful amounts of dioxin. Still, she concurred with some local officials who have called for blood tests of residents near the river.

"Those are definitely elevated levels, there's no ifs, ands or buts about that," said Linda Birnbaum, the EPA director of experimental toxicology, who has studied dioxins for 20 years. "But to me, what I'd really like to know is, is it getting into the people, and are their levels significantly elevated? That, to me, would be the real question."

Disease registry officials are planning to meet with area doctors and pass out leaflets about dioxins and their associated diseases, including cancer, reproductive and immune disorders and an acne-like skin condition.

But Robert Vanderslice, chief of the state Health Department's office of environmental risk, said yesterday that the state has neither the advanced technology nor the money to test blood for dioxin, a complicated task that can cost up to \$2,000 per person.

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"You can't send somebody to their physician and have them order this test," he said. "There's no existing medical infrastructure to support that kind of thing."

He added that disease registry officials "don't feel this testing would be appropriate, based on what they know."

The EPA said yesterday that the purpose of the \$1 million package is relatively modest: to protect the public while a longer-term plan for dealing with the river's problems is drawn up.

The money will help pay for new dioxin testing in river sediment and soil, more fencing around trouble spots, and more meetings and information for the public — much of which the EPA's New England office had already promised. About five groups, including a tenants' association in Providence, have requested meetings with the EPA, an EPA official said yesterday.

Without the \$1 million infusion, said the EPA's Fleming, "We would have found the necessary money to do sampling." He said the agency has spent \$200,000 on dioxin tests of the Woonasquatucket since 1996.

Still, the million-dollar allotment from EPA headquarters reflects a new, heightened level of concern among top agency officials and suggests that pressure from the state's congressional delegation may be having an effect.

The state's members of Congress have noted in letters to Browner that the Clinton administration last year dubbed the waterway an American Heritage River, a lofty title that deems the river worthy of historical note and of speedy access to federal preservation and development grants.

Some speculated yesterday that the label may have helped prod EPA officials in Washington to act quickly on the requests for help.

The new money comes from an emergency fund, established by the federal Superfund Law, set up to safeguard the public against immediate threats from pollution. According to Browner, about \$25 million is drawn from the fund each year to pay for about 200 "emergency responses" around the country.

Browner said the money has been used in the past in cases as minor as removing a barrel or two of hazardous waste and as serious as relocating residents. The latter occurred in a Louisiana case last year involving a flea market that had been hawking an illegal and highly toxic pest-spray.

Experts said yesterday that dioxin cleanups can run into the tens of millions of dollars and may involve bringing high-tech dredging equipment to the river and then trucking away the waste to special, high-heat incinerators.

"You can't use ordinary old dredges, because what you don't want to do is stir up" dioxin sediments in the river, said Michael A. Kamrin, a professor at the Institute for Environmental Toxicology, at Michigan State University. "You need special equipment that captures stuff before it is moved around. It's a very expensive proposition."

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The EPA's headquarters contacted The Journal last week to say Browner would be available for interviews about the environmental proposals unveiled in President Clinton's State of the Union address. Browner agreed yesterday to answer questions about the Woonasquatucket as well.

"I think we do need to know more," she said of the river, adding that her staff in Washington was working on the matter with EPA officials in New England. "We have this emergency fund which we use for situations like this so we can know more. Additional sampling is absolutely warranted. I think the public deserves answers to questions."

The EPA's local hot line for dioxin information is staffed from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and will be operating at least through Friday. The number is 231-9393.