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EPA Details Phase Two of Enforcement and Pollution Prevention Strategy for Woonasquatucket River

BOSTON - Continuing an effort that was launched last year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today announced an intensive enforcement sweep of potential pollution sources to the Woonasquatucket River. The agency also announced an ambitious pollution prevention assistance effort targeted to auto body shops, auto repair facilities and junkyards along and near the river.

Following up on information gathered last year by EPA's Urban Enforcement Team, EPA in the coming weeks will be conducting more than two-dozen inspections at various types of manufacturing facilities in the Woonasquatucket River watershed, which includes Smithfield, Johnston, North Providence, North Smithfield and Providence. The inspections will focus on underground storage tanks, wastewater discharges, hazardous waste storage and handling, and various other environmental compliance issues.

"Whether it's dioxin, wastewater discharges or any other contaminant, EPA is committed to identifying and eliminating sources of pollution into the Woonasquatucket River," said John P. DeVillars, EPA's New England Administrator. "EPA has been working hard for 2½ years to clean up the Woonasquatucket, and with these actions today, we'll be taking a major step forward in accomplishing our goal of making this urban waterway clean and healthy."

The upcoming inspections come on the heels of 39 enforcement inspections the agency has done since last spring at facilities along the Woonasquatucket, many of them metal plating shops and jewelry makers. Inspections in the watershed have resulted in one enforcement action to date - an administrative complaint earlier this month against Microfin Corp. in Providence, proposing a \$1.15 million civil penalty - and more actions are expected.

The impetus for the latest inspection sweep was a river reconnaissance the EPA undertook last spring and summer to identify pollution sources into the river - looking as far north as Stillwater Pond in Smithfield and as far south as Harbor Junction Wharf on the Providence River in Providence. Much of the information was gathered by walking and paddling the river, looking for discharge pipes into the river and industrial activities along the river. Information from the reconnaissance was then used to determine a list of locations and facilities that needed follow-up inspections.

EPA will also be boosting its pollution prevention and technical assistance efforts in the coming months. EPA's technical assistance team will be visiting three-dozen auto body and auto repairs facilities this winter and spring to offer technical assistance on various environmental issues, including storm drain practices, hazardous waste storage and handling procedures and air emission requirements concerning auto-body work. The agency also plans, in cooperation with the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, to undertake an aggressive outreach effort this winter to inform dozens of junkyard owners in the watershed about regulatory requirements for developing and implementing stormwater management plans.

The technical assistance and enforcement sweep are among several initiatives EPA has underway in the Woonasquatucket.

EPA's first involvement in the river was in the spring of 1996, when the agency's Urban Environmental Initiative spearheaded a fish tissue sampling survey that revealed for the first time that there was dioxin in the river ecosystem. EPA has since conducted three additional rounds of sampling, the most recent round being on Jan. 15 of this year when 15 soil samples were collected from three locations adjacent to the river. Preliminary results are expected late this week.

EPA has also helped spearhead the Rhode Island Urban Rivers Team, a coalition of state agencies, environmental groups and community groups that was formed in January 1998. Over the past year, the Urban Rivers Team has focused much of its attention on the Woonasquatucket River. Much of the group's work has been on communications activity to help educate local residents about water quality in the river, public health issues and appropriate uses of the river. The outreach effort has included numerous community meetings, posting of bi-lingual warning signs in high-use areas and distribution of hundreds of brochures. The Urban Rivers Team has also been active in gathering baseline data about water quality in the river.

On the technical assistance front, EPA and other groups have been undertaking an aggressive technical assistance effort over the past year to help Rhode Island's many metal finishing companies come into compliance with environmental laws. The effort is being undertaken through the EPA's Metal Finishing Strategic Goals Program, a three-year-old program that is encouraging metal finishers to meet aggressive pollution prevention goals by the year 2002. Companies that sign up for the program - so far, a dozen metal finishers in Rhode Island have done so - receive compliance and pollution prevention assistance.

Additionally, EPA and DEM are working together to do site assessments and develop cleanup plans for two former industrial properties on the Woonasquatucket so that they can eventually be restored and redeveloped. The two Brownfield sites are Riverside Mills and Lincoln Lace & Braid, both in Providence.