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EPA holds forum tonight on Woonasquatucket cleanup

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NORTH PROVIDENCE -- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will hold a forum tonight on an imminent project to reduce the threat of dioxin exposure at the Superfund site on the Woonasquatucket River.

The agency announced earlier this year that it had approved a plan to restore the Allendale Dam and to remove some of the toxic sediment and soil at the site. Now that the work is tentatively slated to begin later this month, the EPA is hosting an open house for residents interested in learning about the project.

The hours are 7 to 9 p.m. at Town Hall, 2000 Smith St.

"It's going to be very informal," said Angela Bonariggo, community involvement director for EPA, in Boston. "People can drop in as they like."

Poster boards displaying information about the project will be set up and a computer presentation will explain the work. In addition, a number of experts will be available to answer residents' questions, including EPA officials and representatives of Loureiro Engineering Associates, the Connecticut firm that is the project general contractor.

The EPA is anticipating questions about the sediment removal, including how dust and noise will be managed and the routes trucks will be following.

The EPA designated the site as eligible for federal Superfund assistance in February of last year after tests showed high levels of dioxin. The area is located along the Woonasquatucket River, between Route 44 and the Lymanville Dam.

Soon after, the agency cordoned off the area and posted warning signs advising people not to swim, bathe or play in the river and not to eat fish caught there. Later, the EPA hired crews to place earthen caps over contaminated soil near Centredale Manor, the apartment complex for seniors, to reduce dioxin exposure and prevent its spread downstream. These measures were done as quickly as possible to safeguard public health.

The work about to begin is described as "non-time critical," and was first proposed last fall at a public hearing. It is meant to protect public health, but is not considered to be the final solution. A final plan won't be completed until after exhaustive studies are conducted into the extent of contamination at the site and the impact on the environment.

The work starting this summer involves restoring the Allendale Dam, which was breached several years ago. The water level is expected to rise to historic levels, submerging about 26,000 cubic yards of tainted sediment.

Another 2,500 cubic yards of dioxin-contaminated soil, mostly along the residential eastern bank of the river, would remain exposed after the water level rises. A contractor will be hired to remove this material and to truck it to an incinerator in Canada. The sediment will be replaced with clean soil.

Several companies identified by the EPA as responsible for the contamination have agreed to pay for the project, estimated at \$2.6 million.

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