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EPA to go ahead with dioxin cleanup

■ The plan calls for removal of about 2,500 cubic yards of dioxin-contaminated soil from the Woonasquatucket River and restoring the breached Allendale dam, resulting in another 26,000 cubic yards being submerged.

By RICHARD SALIT
Journal Staff Writer

NORTH PROVIDENCE _ The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced yesterday that it will proceed with an interim cleanup plan, first announced last year, to reduce the threat of dioxin exposure at the Superfund site on the Woonasquatucket River.

The plan calls for excavating about 2,500 cubic yards of dioxin-contaminated soil, mostly along the residential eastern bank of the river, and trucking it to an incinerator in Canada. The sediment, which contains dioxin in excess of 1 part per billion, will be replaced with clean soil.

The plan also involves restoring the breached Allendale dam, resulting in a much larger amount of tainted sediment _ about 26,000 cubic yards _ being submerged under water.

"Today's approval is a major milestone in the cleanup of the Woonasquatucket River," Ira Leighton, acting regional administrator for EPA, the EPA, said in a statement. "For the first time, we'll be removing contaminated material from the site."

EPA also announced yesterday that it had obtained favorable results from sediment samples taken last fall from downstream of the Superfund site. The samples taken from the Manton and Dyerville sections of the river, below Manton dam, revealed no soil with dioxin in excess of 1 part per billion.

In October, EPA outlined its preferred alternative for dealing with any imminent threat of exposure to dioxin, a confirmed carcinogen. During a public hearing one month later, environmentalists and area officials expressed their support for the plan.

More support was voiced this week when EPA announced its decision. Those commending the decision included U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy and U.S. Senators Jack Reed and Lincoln Chafee.

"This removal action will significantly reduce the risks to the residents and contribute to our long-term goal of making the Woonasquatucket River fully accessible for fishing and swimming," said Jan Reitsma, director of the state Department of Environmental Management.

The cleanup of the site, located near the Centredale Manor senior high-rise apartment building, is expected to begin in the summer and last nearly a year. EPA representatives will meet with area property owners to discuss how the work will affect them.

EPA estimates the project will cost about \$2.6 million. The money will either come from the federal Superfund or from several businesses that EPA holds responsible for the and cleanup. The agency has asked the businesses to voluntarily perform or finance the work.

The EPA commissioned a study last summer to identify ways to reduce immediate threats to public health from dioxin and to prevent contaminated sediment from being carried any farther downstream.

The options EPA did not favor included:

^ Restoring Allendale dam and placing earthen caps over contaminated soil left exposed. Estimated cost: \$1.8 million.

^ Leaving the dam in its breached state and capping a much larger area of contaminated sediment. Estimated cost: \$2.6 million.

^ Leaving the dam as is and excavating 28,615 cubic yards of exposed sediment. Estimated cost: \$4.5 million to \$14 million, depending on whether the material would be incinerated before disposal or simply consolidated on site and capped.

EPA officials settled on its preferred alternative because of the relatively modest cost and because it contributes to a permanent solution to contamination at the site.

EPA officials say that ultimately they must determine the best way to address the contaminated sediment left under water and that which will remain exposed next to industrial properties along the western bank of the river. The agency must also develop a permanent solution to the contaminated sediment it capped last winter next to Centredale Manor. These studies will take about two years to complete, he said.