

Tests to rate Twelve Mile for recreation

EPA looks for hazards as crews start to restore river after removing dams

By Anna Simon

Clemson bureau
asimon@greenvillenews.com

The Environmental Protection Agency has ordered extensive testing and study on the Twelve Mile River to be sure that it will be safe for recreation.

The agency wants to know if the river meets federal standards for health and safety for people

swimming and kayaking in the water, children splashing and wading along the shore and families picnicking on the banks or sandbars, said Craig Zeller, EPA project manager.

Vic Cocianni, remediation manager for Schlumberger Technology Corp., the international firm ordered to remove two dams and PCB-contaminated sediment behind them, said

the company wants that, too.

"The end result will be that the river will be safe for our children and our children's children," Cocianni said.

His comments come as restoration of the stretch of river where two dams were removed earlier this year begins. The court-ordered dam removal was long awaited yet stirred controversy as heavy rain tore loose banks and trees and released long-buried contamination following the

first removal in February.

With the dams down, the EPA has stepped back in, and residents will see people sampling and surveying on and along the river in the coming months.

"This is a world-class project that we are undertaking to ensure that we get this done right and the community is pleased with the outcome," said Schlumberger spokesman Stephen Harris.

Residents like Larry Dyck still worry about children playing on the banks

of the river where earlier tests by Upstate Forever and Pickens County showed deposits of PCBs, and about the long-term stability and security of a 12-acre landfill holding PCB-contaminated sediment dredged from the water on a hilltop above the river.

The landfill is in the process of being covered with six layers of liners and two feet of soil and will be planted with grass.

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Dyck wants to know whether the area will be fenced and whether children will find their way up the mountain and ride dirt bikes there.

Will seedlings sprout and send tree roots through the liners and puncture the bags containing the dredged sediment? Will rain wash away protection and eventually carry toxins down steep slopes to the river?

County officials worry about future liability if toxic materials leach or leak from the landfill.

That won't happen, Cocianni said.

"It's not trashbags or sandbags sitting on top of a hill. It's engineered systems inside an engineered Class 3 landfill," said Cocianni, who manages remediation for Schlumberger not just for this project but globally and has been spending so much time on the Twelve Mile that he calls it his "second home."

That's because Schlumberger, which inherited the PCB problem when it bought the old Sangamo Weston plant, wants this project done right, he said.

The landfill, built to meet state and federal requirements for hazardous waste, was excavated 90 feet — about the height of a 12-story building — into the mountain and won't protrude above it but will be

contained within it, Cocianni said.

Bulldozers covering the landfill are directed by computerized GPS systems to contour and grade the hill so water flows off of it in a controlled manner and won't cut channels or erode the hill, Cocianni said.

It will be surrounded with a six-foot-tall fence and inspected monthly to check for and remove any saplings trying to grow or burrowing animals, Cocianni said.

Five monitoring wells have been drilled around the perimeter to a depth well below the bottom of the landfill so any leakage would be identified promptly, Cocianni said.

The process will be ongoing, Cocianni said. "Our responsibility never ends."

Schlumberger "has brought the best engineering minds to this project to ensure that it's been done right, and that's been from day one," Harris said.

EPA and state Department of Health and Environmental Control staffers will be present while samples are taken by companies contracted by Schlumberger, Zeller said.

Details on the scope of the testing agreed on in recent meetings first must be put into a written plan and actual sampling probably will begin in December or January, Zeller said. Analysis will take "a conservative approach" under federal guidelines for recreational waters, he said.