

EPA official: Don't eat mud from Twelve Mile Creek

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Craig Zeller of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said he knows toxins are still in the sediment working its way slowly down Twelve Mile Creek.

But he said he doubts whether enough polychlorinated biphenyl droplets are still in this Pickens County waterway's mud to hurt anybody.

"The risk posed by these PCBs in the river system is really from ingestion," said Zeller, remedial project manager for the former Sangamo Weston capacitors plant in Pickens. "People would have to be stuffing their mouths with fistfuls of rich organic leaf material. Frankly I don't think people are eating dirt."

Still, Zeller said, his agency has committed to looking into how much of the cancer-causing agent remains in a two-mile stretch of Twelve Mile Creek that is most vulnerable to the toxin's buildup.

Fast-food boxes, beer bottles and graffiti painted on rocks within the last few months indicate people have been and will continue using the river for recreation.

The Sangamo Weston capacitors plant in Pickens closed in 1987. Records indicate that by the mid-1970s this plant had dumped about 440,000 tons of untreated waste into Town Creek, ultimately reaching Twelve Mile Creek and then trickling into Hartwell Lake. Health advisories against eating fish from Hartwell Lake were first issued in 1976 after PCBs were detected.

Zeller said his best guess now is that more than 90 percent of the waste has been removed and placed in a landfill. But further testing will help ascertain how much is still out there.

Schlumberger Technology Corp., which merged with Sangamo Weston in the 1980s, has paid more than \$100 million for cleanup efforts that started in the mid-1990s with remediation of the original plant site.

Another phase of the cleanup — restoration of Twelve Mile Creek — has largely taken place over the past year. Dredgers first removed PCB-laden sediments that had collected behind two century-old dams. The two dams were demolished this year.

“We didn’t evaluate whether residual sediments would pose an unacceptable risk to remaining uses up there — kayaking and other recreation,” Zeller said. “Also, based on measurements, we want to know what’s the state of sediment transport — where it ends up. If you have some nice storms, where do they push this material?”

Mother Nature, Zeller said, may need assistance in stabilizing banks, carrying sediment downstream and enhancing the creek habitat for fish and aquatic insects.

Larry Dyck, a retired Clemson University biologist, said he is particularly concerned about mud and sand left behind in Twelve Mile Creek when Schlumberger dredged it earlier this year. The corporation flattened and reinforced a shoal along the river to serve as a makeshift road while contractors carted trucks full of sediment from behind the old Woodside II dam.

Most of the road is still there.

Schlumberger’s attorneys, engineers and environmental experts successfully argued in U.S. federal court this summer that the shoal was already there and need not be removed.

“When Schlumberger was arguing that this was all shoaled material coming in as an act of God, it was plausible because it was covered with sand,” Dyck said. “Now that it’s eroding back, you can see at the lower end there’s sand on top but underneath is layered organic material that they didn’t excavate.”

Such material, Dyck said, does not make a shoal. It is also the ideal place for PCBs to collect.

Schlumberger officials did not reply to requests for comment.

Dyck said initial testing also has proven that flood plains in the two-mile stretch of Twelve Mile Creek around the former Woodside I and Woodside II dams contain elevated amounts of PCBs.

The Greenville-based environmental group Upstate Forever and the Pickens County government paid for the spot tests, which took place this summer

They found 50 to 150 parts per million of PCBs in the sediment.

Zeller said the EPA’s cleanup goal for Hartwell Lake is 1 part per million.

“It’s important to note those samplings done by individual parties were biased,” Zeller said. “They were deliberately looking for PCBs in the lenses of leached layers of organic matter. That rich organic matter is a small percentage of total mass.”

Dyck said he believes the EPA will conclude that Twelve Mile Creek is safe, considering no one eats enough fish out of the creek to develop elevated levels of PCBs. Adults, he said, also have evolved beyond eating mud. Zeller said EPA tests will include environmental effects on a person weighing 60 pounds or less.

“Children on the shoreline are more inquisitive,” Dyck said.

Zeller said he expects to have a plan for testing ready in about four weeks and will schedule a public meeting in Pickens County to discuss the work in late November or early December.

“It won’t be a secret,” Zeller said. “We are committed to seeing this through.”



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