



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION III- OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND GOVERNMENT RELATIONS
1650 Arch Street Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103-2029
Phone - 215/814-5100 Fax - 215/814-5102

EPA Environmental News

Contact: Roy Seneca (215) 814-5567
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EPA establishes plan to clean up PCBs in Delaware River

PHILADELPHIA – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has established an environmental plan to reduce polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) released along an 85-mile segment of the Delaware River from Trenton, N.J. downstream to the head of the Delaware Bay, near Liston Point, Del.

“This plan is a critical milestone in removing toxic impairments and ending fish consumption advisories throughout the Delaware estuary,” said Donald S. Welsh, regional administrator for EPA’s mid-Atlantic region, which includes Delaware and Pennsylvania.

Jane M. Kenny, EPA regional administrator for New York and New Jersey, commented: “We will work diligently with our partners to make a dramatic improvement in the condition of the Delaware River. Though we no longer put PCBs in our products, their widespread use in the past means that they still contaminate our waters and aquatic life. Imposing limits on PCBs in the Delaware estuary is another of the many ways EPA is working to remove these chemicals from our environment once and for all.”

The states of Delaware, Pennsylvania and New Jersey consider the Delaware estuary to be impaired due to elevated levels of PCBs in the tissue of fish caught in parts of the Delaware River from Trenton to the Delaware Bay. EPA has established the TMDL plan on behalf of those states based on the work of the Delaware River Basin Commission.

The plan establishes four “pollution budgets,” known as Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL), that set the maximum amount of a specific pollutant – in this case PCBs – that can be introduced into the river. For the purpose of implementing the PCB limits, the Delaware River from Trenton to Liston Point has been divided into four segments, each with its own TMDL.

The EPA has classified PCBs as a probable human carcinogen. Although their production was banned in the United States in the late 1970s, substantial amounts of the toxic substance remain in the environment. PCBs are still found in thousands of industrial and commercial applications, including electrical transformers, and in paint, plastic, and rubber products. They accumulate in river sediment and soil, and in the fatty tissue of fish. Human exposure results from eating those fish.

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The PCB TMDLs address all potential sources of PCBs, including stormwater runoff and runoff from Superfund sites, which are the major contributor of PCBs into the river. EPA, the three states, and other stakeholders are in the process of developing pollution reduction strategies to address these major sources.

The TMDLs also will limit 142 permitted discharges from municipal wastewater and industrial facilities along the river that were identified as potential sources. These sources will be required to identify how and where the PCBs are entering their systems, and then devise a strategy to capture the PCBs so they don't pass through to the Delaware River.

“We need to learn more about how PCBs get into the river so we can start to eliminate them. Enlisting facilities with discharge permits is a key step in creating long-term controls,” Welsh explained.

When a water body does not meet its water quality standards for a particular pollutant, despite the technological controls at industrial and municipal wastewater treatment plants, the federal Clean Water Act requires the state to include the water body on its list of impaired waters.

Once the water body is on the list, a TMDL must be developed to express the maximum amount of the pollutant causing the problem that the estuary, lake or river can receive and still attain the standard. After that load amount is calculated, all sources of that pollutant in the watershed are required to reduce their contributions of the contaminant to specified levels.

EPA and its partners held several public meetings earlier this year to explain the plan and obtain public comments. All comments were evaluated and responded to prior to today's issuance of a final plan to address PCBs in the Delaware River.

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