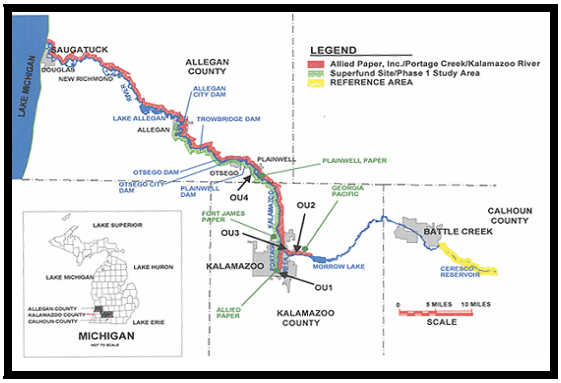
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Region 5 Office of Public Affairs
Kalamazoo River Superfund Project

Fact Sheet

The Kalamazoo River Cleanup

March 2002

Kalamazoo River Superfund Project Community Involvement Team



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EPA has assumed responsibility for a Superfund cleanup on the Kalamazoo River. The Allied Paper Inc./Portage Creek/Kalamazoo River Superfund Site, referred to here as the Kalamazoo River Superfund Project, stretches 80-miles from Saugatuck on the west to about 10 miles east of Battle Creek, near Sunrise Heights.

In July 2001, EPA took over as lead agency for the project at the request of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, which will continue to have a significant role in the appropriate cleanup.

The Kalamazoo River Superfund Project runs through two counties in southwestern Michigan: Allegan and Kalamazoo (see the map on page 4). The site includes five disposal areas, six paper mill properties, the Kalamazoo River, a tributary of Lake Michigan that flows northwest, and Portage Creek, a tributary of the Kalamazoo River that flows north.

The project includes three miles of Portage Creek from Cork Street to where it joins with the Kalamazoo River; and from this confluence downstream to the Allegan City Dam. Because PCBs have migrated downstream, the Superfund remedial investigation includes the area to the mouth of the Kalamazoo River at Lake Michigan, about 80 miles.

PCBs, which are classed as probable human carcinogens, are mixtures of synthetic and organic chemicals with properties ranging from oily liquids to waxy solids. PCBs were used in hundreds of industrial and commercial applications, including electrical, heat transfer, and hydraulic equipment; as plasticizers in paints, plastics and rubber products; in pigments, dyes and carbonless copy paper, and many other applications. EPA banned PCB production in 1977 because of their adverse effects on health and the environment.

Background

Over the years, the Kalamazoo River has been used as a power source for paper mills built along the river and as a disposal site for the paper mills and communities adjacent to the river. The river, like many other rivers in industrialized areas, was used to dispose of wastes such as sawdust and animal carcasses. By 1869, its water quality was so bad that many communities along the river stopped using it as a source of drinking water.

By the early 1950s, fish kills and odor problems plagued the river due to waste dumped in the river by the adjacent mills. In 1971, PCBs were identified as a problem in the Kalamazoo River. In 1978, the Michigan Department of Public Health issued an advisory warning against eating fish from the river because they were contaminated with PCBs. In 1984, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (now MDEQ) began a long-term project to clean up the river after it was listed in the Michigan Environmental Response Act.

In 1990, in response to the quantity and extent of PCB contamination, this site was officially included on the National Priorities List under provisions of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act, commonly known as Superfund.

The state identified four companies potentially responsible for the contamination:

- Millennium Holdings Inc.
- Georgia-Pacific Corp.
- Plainwell Paper Inc.
- Fort James Corp.

The four parties together are known as the Kalamazoo River Study Group. The state has entered into a settlement with the responsible parties under which they agree to conduct and pay for studying clean-up options for the site, as well as reimburse the state for oversight. The agreement, embodied in an "administrative order on consent," is legally enforceable in court.

PCB, the primary contaminant, was introduced to Portage Creek and the Kalamazoo River through discharges and disposal of contaminated paper residue by the paper industry. For example, Allied Paper Inc. has operated paper mills in Kalamazoo since 1925. From 1957 to 1971, Allied, a subsidiary of SCM Corp., recycled and deinked paper, including carbonless copy paper, which contained 3.4 percent PCB by weight.

EPA and the state have targeted five areas, referred to as operable units, that contain millions of cubic yards of PCB-contaminated waste with an estimated 350,000 pounds of PCBs in river sediment. The contaminated sediment has been largely deposited in four impoundment areas. Numerous measures have been taken to clean up and reduce PCB releases from the disposal areas.

A summary of the activities at the operable units is in development and will be presented in another fact sheet.

Communities backgrounds

The Kalamazoo River, or a tributary of it, crosses through many communities, which include the townships of Allegan, Cooper, Gun Plain, Kalamazoo, Otsego, Saugatuck, Trowbridge and Valley, as well as the cities of Allegan, Fennville, Kalamazoo, Otsego, Parchment, Plainwell, Portage, and Saugatuck.

The river runs through the northeastern portion of the City of Kalamazoo, the largest community in the project area. Kalamazoo, known as an educational and cultural center, is surrounded by the cities of Portage and Parchment and the towns of Cooper and Kalamazoo.

Downstream of Kalamazoo are Plainwell and Otsego, known as the "Twin Cities." Each of these cities is supported by major employers, which include a paper manufacturer in Plainwell and a brass fittings manufacturer in Otsego. These cities are surrounded by the townships of Gun Plain, Otsego and Trowbridge.

Allegan, county seat of Allegan County, is downstream of the Twin Cities. Allegan, the largest city in the county, serves as a commercial and financial center for the surrounding townships, including Allegan and Valley. Lake Allegan, the largest impoundment on the Kalamazoo, is in this area.

The next community downstream is Fennville, an agricultural community often called "Goosetown" because of the large population of Canada geese that make their temporary home at Fennville State Game Area. Although it is not directly on the Kalamazoo River, Fennville residents enjoy the benefits the river provides, such as recreational opportunities.

The City of Saugatuck is the last community the Kalamazoo River passes through before it enters Lake Michigan. Saugatuck is a resort community on Lake Michigan that attracts thousands of temporary residents to summer cottages and other resort facilities. Marinas and other recreational services are also important in this area. The town of Saugatuck is outside the city limits.

The communities within the project area have experienced various amounts of growth over the past 10 years. The town of Valley experienced the greatest growth, almost 60 percent, followed closely by Fennville with 43 percent growth. Otsego, however, had an 18 percent population decline. Nine of the 16 communities experienced a growth rate below the state's rate of about 7 percent between 1990 and 2000.

Open office hours

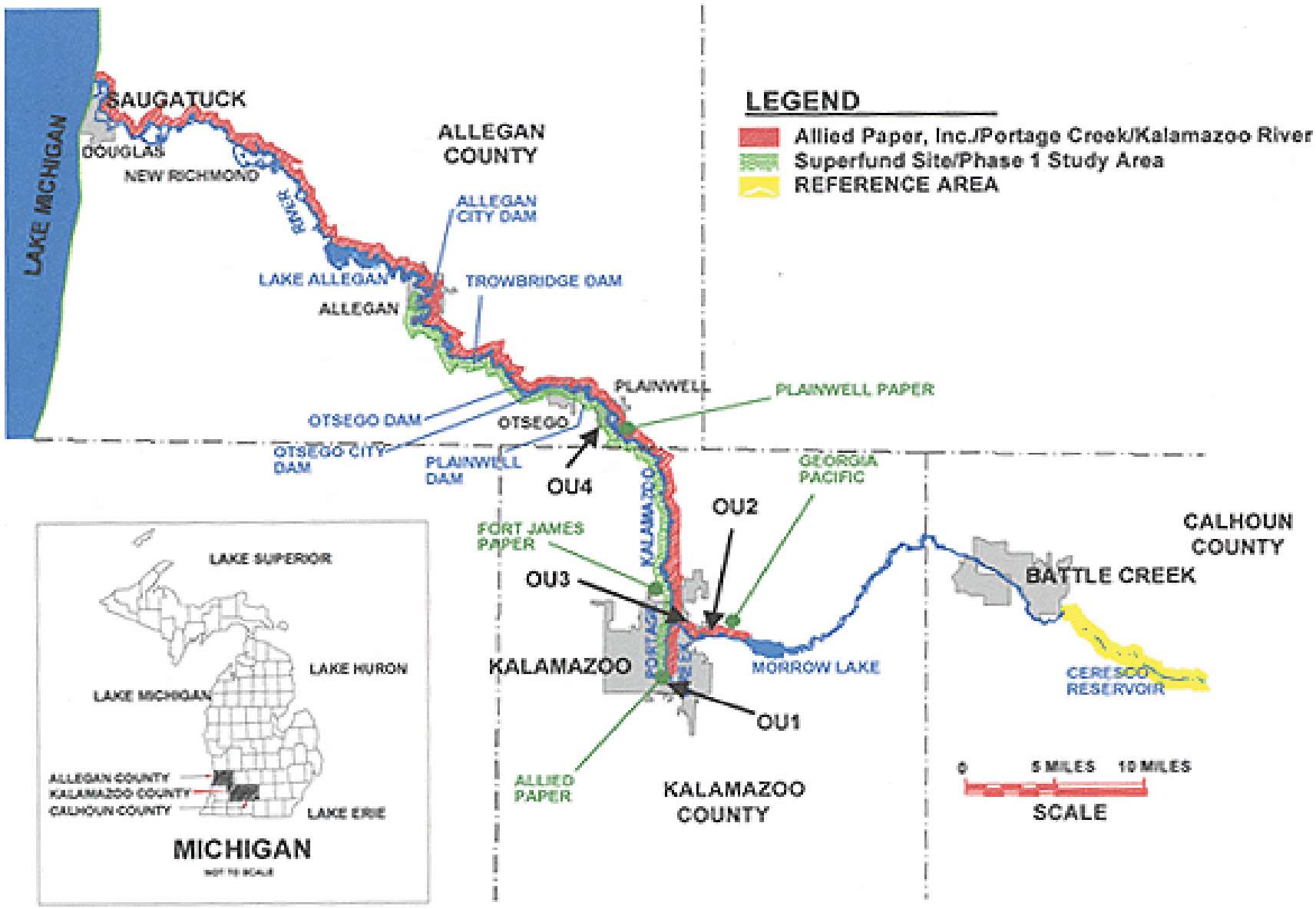
EPA will hold open office hours, which will give the public an opportunity to meet community involvement coordinators, ask questions, and express their suggestions and concerns about the project. The open office hours will be held, as needed, in various places throughout the project area.

Information repositories

Six information repositories, where project information is available, have been set up in community libraries, which are listed on page 5. EPA will organize each of these repositories to make it easier for the public to use.

Internet

EPA has set up a Web site that it will maintain and regularly update. The Web site will contain information about activities and upcoming meetings, fact sheets, news releases, and technical documents. MDEQ has been maintaining a Web site. The addresses for both are on page 5.


LEGEND
Allied Paper, Inc./Portage Creek/Kalamazoo River Superfund Site/Phase 1 Study Area
REFERENCE AREA
LAKE MICHIGAN
SAUGATUCK
DOUGLAS
NEW RICHMOND
ALLEGAN COUNTY
ALLEGAN CITY DAM
LAKE ALLEGAN
TROWBRIDGE DAM
ALLEGAN
PLAINWELL
PLAINWELL PAPER
OTSEGO DAM
OTSEGO
OTSEGO CITY DAM
PLAINWELL DAM
OU4
GEORGIA PACIFIC
OU2
FORT JAMES PAPER
OU3
CALHOUN COUNTY
BATTLE CREEK
KALAMAZOO
MORROW LAKE
CERESCO RESERVOIR
OU1
ALLIED PAPER
KALAMAZOO COUNTY
0 5 MILES 10 MILES
SCALE
LAKE SUPERIOR
LAKE HURON
LAKE MICHIGAN
ALLEGAN COUNTY
KALAMAZOO COUNTY
CALHOUN COUNTY
LAKE ERIE
MICHIGAN
NOT TO SCALE

For more information:

Information Repositories
where you can find more information on the
Kalamazoo River Superfund Project

Kalamazoo Public Library
315 South Rose
Kalamazoo, MI

Charles Ransom Library
180 South Sherwood
Plainwell, MI

Otsego District Library
219 South Farmer Street
Otsego, MI

Waldo Library
Western Michigan University
1903 West Michigan Avenue
Kalamazoo, MI

Allegan Public Library
331 Hubbard Street
Allegan, MI

Saugatuck-Douglas Library
10 Mixer Street
Douglas, MI

On the Internet:

Federal: www.epa.gov/region5/sites/kalproject/
State: www.deq.state.mi.us/erd/k-zoo/main.htm

Notes