

Ashtabula River Cleanup Begins; Contaminated Sediment to be Removed

Ashtabula River Area of Concern

Ashtabula, Ohio

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About the Great Lakes Legacy Act

Although discharges of toxic substances into the Great Lakes have been reduced over the last 20 years, high concentrations of pollution remain in the bottom of some rivers and harbors. That poses a potential risk to people and wildlife. As a result, states have issued advisories in most locations around the Great Lakes against eating locally caught fish. The tributaries and harbors identified as having pollution problems are known as “areas of concern,” or AOCs. There are 31 AOCs on the U.S. side of the Great Lakes. The Ashtabula River AOC is one of these areas.

Congress passed and the President signed the Great Lakes Legacy Act of 2002 to address the problem of contaminated sediment in these 31 areas. The Legacy Act authorizes \$270 million in funding over five years for cleanups. Fiscal Year 2004 was the first in which Legacy Act funds were available for projects, and Congress appropriated \$9.9 million. In 2005, Congress appropriated \$22.3 million, and \$29.6 million was appropriated in 2006 for Legacy Act cleanups. The President has requested \$49.6 million in the proposed 2007 budget.

Other Legacy Act cleanup projects are Black Lagoon near Detroit and Hog Island Inlet in Superior, Wis., both completed in 2005, and Ruddiman Creek in Muskegon, Mich., completed earlier this year.

Work has begun on the cleanup of the Ashtabula River, a project to remove 25,000 pounds of hazardous PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) and other contaminants from the river bottom. It is the first cleanup project in Ohio funded by the federal Great Lakes Legacy Act, and the largest of the four Legacy Act projects funded to date.

Workers will remove about 500,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment and provide new habitat in the river. Because the sediment can flow into Lake Erie, removing it is good for the lake and the entire Great Lakes basin. A secondary benefit will be a much deeper Ashtabula River, allowing for the return of normal commercial navigation and recreational boating in the river and harbor.

The \$50 million project is expected to be finished in about three years. Half the funding is from the Legacy Act and the other half from the Ashtabula City Port Authority in cooperation with other public and private entities, including the Ashtabula River Cooperation Group II, a group of private companies. The state of Ohio has provided \$7 million for the project and numerous other organizations, including U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will play important roles.



A large excavator does preliminary clearing in the area that will soon become a special landfill. Contaminated sediment from the Ashtabula River will be contained permanently in this landfill.

Phase One work begins

Construction has already started on a special landfill designed to safely contain the contaminated sediment after it is dredged out of the river. The facility is being built on property near State Road and the upper reaches of Fields Brook, a stream that flows into the Ashtabula River. This property is controlled by the cooperation group, which will assume long-term operation and maintenance responsibilities for the landfill when the project is completed.

Dredging work on the river will begin this fall and is expected to take a total of 13 months with a pause in dredging expected during winter. Contaminated sediment will be dug up and pumped to the landfill through a 3-mile pipeline. When dredging is complete, workers will put a permanent cover over the landfill. The landfill will be monitored for the next 50 years to ensure the pollutants remain contained.

The final phase of the project, expected to be done in 2008, is habitat restoration. This part of the project will restore the east side of river to repair any damage caused by the dredging project and provide a clean environment for fish and other wildlife to live and reproduce. The Ashtabula River is a much more ambitious project than the three previous cleanups funded by the Great Lakes Legacy Act. It is EPA's first attempt to comprehensively address contaminated sediment in an entire Area of Concern. Previous projects have focused on a portion of an AOC. Dredging on the Ashtabula River will remove more than twice the volume of sediment as in the three previous Legacy Act projects combined.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, one of EPA's partners in the protection of the Great Lakes, plans to dredge a downstream segment of the river in a separate project. Completing both projects will remove the most serious problem in the Ashtabula River AOC, and may put the river on a fast track for removal from the list of Great Lakes AOCs.

Pollution harms "river of many fish"

Iroquois inhabitants referred to the river as the Hash-tah-buh-lah, or "river of many fish." Numerous fish species still live there, but in 1997 the Ohio Department of Health posted warning signs along the lower reaches of the river advising residents to limit their consumption of fish caught in the Ashtabula River. The cleanup project is expected to help hasten the day when those signs can come down.

The Ashtabula River flows into Lake Erie at the city of Ashtabula, Ohio. Its drainage basin covers an area of

137 square miles, including a section in western Pennsylvania. Major tributaries include Fields Brook, Hubbard Run and Ashtabula Creek. From the 1940s through the late 1970s, discharges of contaminants settled in the mud along the river's last two miles. Besides PCBs, the contaminated river bottom also contains heavy metals, very low-level radioactive material and other chemical pollutants.

The project encompasses the Ashtabula Area of Concern. AOCs are severely degraded sites within the Great Lakes where there is significant pollution. Several factors led to the listing of the region as an AOC, including fish consumption advisories and habitat loss. These factors also affect recreational uses of the area and the overall health of the ecosystem, which in turn influences Lake Erie and the entire Great Lakes.

For more information

These EPA and local contacts are available for your questions and comments about the Ashtabula River sediment cleanup project.

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