

Great Lakes Legacy Act Partnership Spurs Ashtabula River Cleanup

Ashtabula River Area of Concern

Ashtabula, Ohio

December 2005

About the Great Lakes Legacy Act

The Legacy Act provides a quick and effective tool for addressing contaminated sediment issues in the Great Lakes. Congress passed and the President signed the Great Lakes Legacy Act of 2002 to address the problem of contaminated sediment in American Areas of Concern.

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. The tributaries and harbors identified as having pollution problems are known as Areas of Concern, or AOCs. There are 43 AOCs on the Great Lakes—26 on the American side, 12 in Canada and five shared between the two countries.

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 fiscal year 2005, Congress provided \$22.3 million, and for the current fiscal year Congress appropriated \$30 million for the Legacy Act. A key requirement of the Act is the identification of a non-federal partner who can provide at least 35 percent of the project costs.

Other Legacy Act cleanup projects are the Black Lagoon near Detroit and Hog Island Inlet/St. Louis River in Superior, Wis., both completed this year, and Ruddiman Creek in Muskegon, Mich.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will use funding from the federal Great Lakes Legacy Act to join the state of Ohio and local partners in a large cleanup project on the lower reaches of the Ashtabula River. With a price tag of \$50 million, removal of 600,000 cubic yards of river mud (sediment) polluted by 25,000 pounds of hazardous PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) represents the largest and most expensive project in the three-year history of the Legacy Act. Work is about to begin on the first stages of the river cleanup that is expected to take three to four years.

The Ashtabula City Port Authority will finance 50 percent of the project 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 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will play a important role.

The cleanup plan involves dredging the sediment and pumping it through a 3-mile pipeline to a disposal facility near State Road and the upper reaches of Fields Brook, a stream that flows into the Ashtabula River. After the contaminated sediment is removed, habitat restoration



This aerial photograph shows the section of the Ashtabula River that will be cleaned up as part of the Great Lakes Legacy Act project.

will take place along the east side of the river to provide a place for fish and other wildlife to live and reproduce.

The first phase of the project involves the port authority and its partners constructing an approved disposal facility on property controlled by the cooperation group. The disposal facility will contain the sediment safely once it is piped from the river. The port authority will assume the long-term operation and maintenance responsibilities for this facility.

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 improve fish habitat to the point where the warnings along the river are no longer necessary. They also expect the cleanup will improve the environment for recreational boating and stop polluted sediment from flowing into Lake Erie, thereby aiding the entire Great Lakes basin.

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. There is concentrated industrial development around Fields Brook and east of the river mouth. 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 low-level radioactive material, heavy metals 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. The Ashtabula sediment removal project is the first step in removing the AOC label from this site. 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. A positive impact of the project is the expected removal of dredging restrictions in the river that have hampered both commercial and recreational navigation.

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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