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Ward PCB cleanup may reach creeks, too

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One of the area's biggest Superfund pollution cleanup projects may be expanded to dig up contaminated soil in some creeks downstream of the Ward Transformer industrial site, where hazardous waste seeped toward Lake Crabtree.

As contractors prepare to start removing tons of polluted soil from the former electric transformer manufacturer near Raleigh-Durham International Airport, federal environmental officials are now focusing on a \$4.9 million cleanup plan for the creeks and lakes below the plant, including Lake Crabtree County Park.

The contamination -- primarily polychlorinated biphenyls -- came from spills of oil used in electrical transformers in the 1960s and '70s. PCBs remain in the environment for decades and may cause cancer in humans. Ward Transformer built and reconditioned transformers at the site from 1964 until the end of 2005. The company's methods of handling PCB-laced oil drained from the transformers in earlier decades led to widespread contamination of the site and nearby creeks, causing the site to be designated a high-priority cleanup under the federal government's Superfund Program.

Fish in Lake Crabtree have elevated levels of PCBs, and people are required to release everything they catch, said Park Manager Drew Cade. "Fishing activity in general has been reduced dramatically," Cade said.

"If we see somebody with a bucket of fish, I have the authority to dump that bucket out for their own protection."

The plan recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency involves excavating contaminated sediment from tributaries downstream of Ward Transformer and from Little Brier Creek and Brier Creek. The streams, which total about three miles in length, would be restored once the contamination is removed. The work is expected to take three to five months.

EPA's preferred cleanup plan calls for letting Brier Creek Reservoir, a flood control pond, and Lake Crabtree, a recreational lake, recover naturally. EPA officials theorize that once they remove contamination from the Ward Transformer site, the sediment washing downstream into the lake will be clean and will bury contaminated sediment deeper. Levels of pollution in fish tissue would also decline in years ahead.

A more complex and costly cleanup alternative, estimated at \$540 million, involves excavating soil from Brier Creek Reservoir and Lake Crabtree in addition to removing contamination from the creeks. Under that plan, EPA estimates that it would take eight years to reduce contamination in fish in Lake Crabtree and 12 years at Brier Creek Reservoir, after completion of excavation.

Because it would take at least three years to excavate the lake and reservoir, the recovery time for fish is shorter under the less expensive project, EPA says. Officials estimate that by leaving the lake beds alone, it will take nine years for fish in Lake Crabtree to have safe concentrations of PCBs and 14 years in Brier Creek Reservoir. Fish would be monitored, and warnings about consuming fish would remain posted.

Peter deFur, president of Environmental Stewardship Concepts and technical adviser for the Neuse Riverkeeper, said EPA needs to take more sediment samples from Lake Crabtree and Brier Creek Reservoir before concluding that those water bodies can recover naturally. EPA has taken six samples from the 159-acre Brier Creek Reservoir and 20 samples from the 520-acre Lake Crabtree.

"The distribution of samples is very thin," deFur said.

"I don't think that is enough to characterize the nature and extent of contamination in those water bodies."

Luis Flores, who is overseeing the project for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said concerns about the number of samples had been raised two years ago, so EPA took more. "I think we have enough," he said.

The tests picked up minute levels of PCBs in sediment at the bottom of Brier Creek Reservoir and Lake Crabtree but none along the Lake Crabtree shoreline or farther downstream in Crabtree Creek, Flores said. However, fish from Lake Crabtree and Crabtree Creek have shown unsafe levels of PCBs, prompting warnings about eating them.

Nile Testerman, an environmental engineer with the state Division of Waste Management, said if investigators find a lot of contamination in Brier Creek, which they plan to sample further, it could spur more testing in Lake Crabtree. So far, he said, the testing has turned up low amounts of contamination below Little Brier Creek.

A 2005 legal settlement, approved by the Department of Justice, requires Ward Transformer and companies that did business with it, including Progress Energy, to share the cost of cleaning up the industrial site. Flores said that once a plan is finalized for the additional cleanup in the creeks, EPA will negotiate with the companies to pay for decontaminating those areas.

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HOW TO HAVE YOUR SAY

EPA is taking public comments on its cleanup plan for Lake Crabtree and the other water bodies below Ward Transformer through Oct. 4.

A copy of the plan is available at Wake County's North Regional Library, 7009 Harps Mill Road, Raleigh.

Comments may be submitted by e-mail to flores.luis@@epa.gov or sent by mail to:

Luis B. Flores

Superfund Division-SRSEB

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

61 Forsyth St., S.W.

Atlanta, GA 30303

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