

Judge urges action on Hartwell cleanup

Anderson says contamination needs attention; new risks emerge

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A federal judge who three years ago ordered steps to begin cleaning up chemical contamination from Lake Hartwell told *The Greenville News* it's time to take action.

"We better be doing something," said U.S. District Judge G. Ross Anderson Jr., when contacted by the newspaper and asked if the parties in the decades-long struggle to address the widespread contamination of the lake by the chemical PCB were moving swiftly enough.

"If you stir up the sediment in Lake Hartwell, you've got a hell of a problem," said Anderson, who signed an order in 2006 for removal of two Twelve Mile River dams still on the river today. The two century-old dams will be taken down by Schlumberger Technology Corp. as part of a plan to allow fresh sediment to flow into Hartwell and cover the PCB-contaminated lake bottom.

Anderson's order was

part of a settlement related to a Superfund cleanup of the former Sangamo Weston manufacturing site in Pickens now owned by Schlumberger. Representatives of the company and the government said earlier this month that they were closing their differences on the approach to the problem.

Fifteen years after a Superfund decision addressed PCB contamination in Lake Hartwell, some fish are still unsafe to eat and new health concerns are emerging.

Posted health advisories around Lake Hartwell, one of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' most visited lakes in the eastern U.S., warn against eating certain fish in the lake contaminated by release of 400,000 pounds of PCBs between 1955 and 1978 from the former Sangamo-Weston capacitor manufacturing plant in Pickens.

"When you introduce persistent contaminants into a water body, it takes a long time to recover," said Craig Zeller, project manager with the Environmental Protection Agency.

The PCBs entered Town Creek from the plant site

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PCB

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and flowed into the Twelve Mile River, which empties into Hartwell.

The danger of eating fish became known in 1993. A 1994 remediation plan called for covering contaminated sediment with new sediment flowing down the Twelve Mile into the lake.

A new five-year review of the Hartwell and Twelve Mile River, part of the Superfund site to be presented at a public meeting tentatively in July, shows a drop in the PCB level in sediment but not in fish, Zeller said.

That disturbs but doesn't surprise Bill Bowerman, a professor of wildlife ecology and ecotoxicology at Clemson University who lives on the Twelve Mile River. He frequently sees fishermen on the river bank and worries about whether these people know about or understand the fish advisories.

He's also concerned about long-term risks to wildlife, such as mink and bald eagles, that feed on fish and other aquatic material in the river, because PCBs are in the food chain.

PCBs are known carcinogens. Dr. Charles J. Everett of the Medical University of South Carolina has conducted national studies that associate high blood pressure, hypertension and diabetes with PCB exposure.

Dr. David Carpenter, a public health physician and toxicologist at the Institute for Health and the Environment at the University at Albany in New York, also links PCB exposure to increased loss of IQ and memory function, hypothyroidism, birth defects and suppressed immune systems.

Bowerman, who has studied PCBs for 25 years and conducted studies on their effect on wildlife for a Superfund dredging project on the Fox River that flows into Green Bay, Wis., said dredging would have provided a faster remedy

on Hartwell, and feels an opportunity for dredging was missed when the lake hit a record 22-foot low this past winter.

Zeller said contamination at Hartwell is "widespread but low-level" versus concentrated levels at some other sites nationwide being dredged, and Hartwell's lake bottom is more stable compared to a river such as the Hudson River, where a huge Superfund dredging operation has begun.

Because of the Hudson River issues, the EPA was asked to evaluate its sediment management strategy nationwide several years ago, and three phases of study were conducted at Hartwell and used in a 2005 EPA guidance document, Zeller said.

The 1994 Record of Decision for Hartwell would have to be amended in order to dredge, and that would be a long process, Zeller and Bowerman agree.

Dredging was discussed during the 1990s decision process. Dredging is costly

and has its own disadvantages, and a fish advisory is still likely for an extended time, Zeller said.

Each option has advantages and disadvantages, said Thom Berry, spokesman for the state Department of Health and Environmental Control, which he said supports the EPA decision.

"You've had a blanketing of new sediment washed down to cover the contamination that was here from the 1970s time frame when we first learned of the issue," Berry said.

Still, the recent record-low lake levels have raised new concerns.

"You have the worst possible scenario with the lake shrinking in size and these contaminated sediments drying," said Carpenter, whose office overlooks the Hudson River, where he's documented a higher rate

of PCB-related diseases compared to the general population.

PCBs from exposed, dried sediments can enter the air and be inhaled, Carpenter said.

"When you breathe them in, they are absorbed. They cause a host of diseases more common in people who live near contaminated sites," Carpenter said.

Zeller called the point moot because the lake now

is nearing full pool.

Hartwell was 655.82 feet above mean sea level last Friday, which is 4 feet below full pool.

"If that exposure was present before, it isn't now," Zeller said.

Eating fish is the primary exposure risk at Hartwell, Zeller said.

Health warnings are posted and public responses to past mailings indicate high awareness, he said.