

Baker supports national designation for contaminated Lower Neponset River

By **Kate Lusignan** Globe Correspondent, Updated July 12, 2021, 5:41 p.m.

Governor Charlie Baker is urging the US Environmental Protection Agency to place the Lower Neponset River on its Superfund National Priority List, citing the “serious nature” of the water’s contamination.

The designation would give the state access to federal funding to clean up the river, which environmental advocates say is long overdue.

“It’s always an environmental justice issue having rivers that are not clean enough for people to swim in or safely recreate in,” said Julia Blatt, executive director of the Massachusetts River Alliance.

A study by the US Geological Survey found that the Lower Neponset River, which runs 3.7 miles from the Mother Brook in Hyde Park to the Walter Baker Dam in Dorchester, contained PCB contamination behind the Tileston and Hollingsworth Dam in Hyde Park and the Walter Baker Dam.

“Our Department of Environmental Protection has been working together with EPA to help the local communities understand the site and the benefits of adding the Lower Neponset River to the National Priorities List. We look forward to continuing this coordinated effort to clean up this site,” Baker wrote in his letter to the EPA sent on June 25.

Polychlorinated Biphenyls, PCBs, are manmade chemicals that were commercially manufactured in the United States from 1929 until their production was banned in 1979.

The pollutants have been a concern for years, said Kerry Snyder, advocacy director at the Neponset River Watershed Association. Broader efforts to restore the river's health, such as reintroducing native fish populations, cannot happen until the contaminants are removed, she said.

Efforts to have the river listed as a Superfund site began in 2017, said Martin Suuberg, commissioner of the state's Department of Environmental Protection. The PCB contamination was caused by industrial operations along the river dating back to the 1930s.

Suuberg said he expects the designation will be approved because state environmental officials have been working with the EPA on the issue. He predicted that the status would not be granted before next spring.

Pending site approval, the EPA will also attempt to locate the companies responsible for the pollution and "bring them to the table in a collaborative manner to undertake the cleanup," Suuberg said.

According to a spokesman at the MassDEP, the "EPA would conduct a thorough and detailed review of any potential parties that may have contributed to the contamination or otherwise have liability" as part of the listing process.

Because PCBs have been found in the river's sediment the project will probably include dredging, which is costly, said Blatt, of the river alliance. The federal government has "deeper pockets" than the state to hold responsible parties accountable, she said.

"A local community doesn't have the resources to do something like this," Blatt said. "A watershed can't do this, and it looks like even the state feels like they are really not able to."

If the site is placed on the Superfund National Priority List, the community will have input on cleanup strategies, Snyder said.

“It’s going to have implications: Where are they staging? Is it going to block the Greenway trail?” Snyder said. “We will insist on a lot of close community engagements around how the cleanup is going to happen.”

Massachusetts has 33 sites on the Superfund list, with one awaiting approval. The most recent addition was a site of a contaminated factory building in Amesbury, in 2017.

Snyder said the Superfund designation would be an important milestone for the river and residents.

“It is so important to clean it up for ecological reasons, for public health reasons, and really for quality of life for diverse communities that live in the Lower Neponset,” she said.

Kate Lusignan can be reached at kate.lusignan@globe.com.

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