

The Neponset River, a hidden jewel of Boston, has become a tarnished gem

By [David Abel](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 25, 2021, 4:32 p.m.



An old refrigerator is caught in the Tileston & Hollingsworth Dam in Hyde Park. The EPA this month proposed designating a 3.7-mile stretch of the Lower Neponset River as one of 13 new Superfund sites in the country. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Hidden amid the maze of congested streets stretching from Hyde Park to Dorchester, there's an urban artery without traffic, concealed by a thicket of old trees, as serene as the gentle rapids in its granite-lined bends.

Serene — and appallingly neglected.

As Ian Cooke paddled his canoe on a recent afternoon past the densely populated neighborhoods along either shore, it felt at times as if he was deep in the woods on a serpentine river far from Boston, save for the rust-colored water and the toxic sediment beneath it.

“It’s a lovely spot,” he said. “Nature finds a way to work back into places like this.”



The sun set over Mill Pond Reservation in Hyde Park. In 2006 and 2007, the state Department of Environmental Protection oversaw a large removal of contaminated sediments in Mother Brook, which feeds into the Neponset River. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

But the natural splendor of the Neponset River remains something of an illusion. This hidden jewel of the city, which meanders 29 miles from Foxborough to Boston Harbor, has become badly tarnished. It was fouled by years of pollution from a host of mills and manufacturing plants along its banks in Boston that have made its fish poisonous to eat and its bottom laden with polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, the carcinogenic byproducts of industrial activity that began nearly a century ago.

Cooke, executive director of the Neponset River Watershed Association, and other local community leaders have spent years urging state and federal regulators to clean the river, a watery boundary between Boston and Milton that for centuries generated power for the adjacent grist, gunpowder, and paper mills, hoping one day it will be pure enough to fish and swim in.



A sign near the Neponset River along Truman Parkway, warning visitors of the high levels of PCBs. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Now, despite delays as a result of the pandemic, the US Environmental Protection Agency is on the cusp of taking action. The EPA this month proposed designating a 3.7-mile stretch of the Lower Neponset River as one of 13 new Superfund sites in the country.

If added to the Superfund National Priorities List, the Neponset would be one of more than 1,300 such sites in the United States, including 33 in Massachusetts. The state's last Superfund site was a contaminated factory in Amesbury designated in 2017.

The establishment of a Superfund site means the EPA would likely put significant federal

dollars, scientific expertise, and legal muscle behind the cleanup, which could cost tens of millions of dollars.

“We worry about exposure to the community around these types of rivers,” said Bryan Olson, a senior adviser to the regional administrator at the EPA’s offices in New England. “We want communities in urban areas to be able to enjoy a beautiful river like this, without concern about any contamination.”

The agency recently started a 60-day public comment period about the proposed designation, with a [virtual public meeting](#) scheduled for Oct. 5. With little opposition expected, Olson said the EPA could approve the proposal by the end of the year.



Milton high school students carried in their boat after rowing along the Neponset River near Baker Dam in Lower Mills. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

If that happens, agency scientists would spend the next two to three years collecting thousands of samples from the river, while the agency’s enforcement division, working with the Justice Department, would seek to establish who was responsible for the

pollution. There are a number of companies that likely contaminated the river, going back as early as the 1930s, but neither state nor federal officials have sufficient evidence to force them or their successors to pay for the cleanup, they said.

“We’re hopeful that we can move forward quickly, so that we can start getting it cleaned up as soon as possible,” Olson said.

Martin Suuberg, commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection, said he’s hopeful the EPA will approve the river as a Superfund site.

“The involvement of the EPA promises the quickest course of action to move ahead with the cleanup,” he said.

About 15 years ago, after the toxic sediment was first identified, state officials compelled Thomas & Betts Co., a producer of electrical equipment that had acquired a local manufacturing plant for electrical wiring that had contributed to the pollution, to clean a portion of the river known as Mother Brook in Hyde Park. But officials later discovered that the PCBs were spread in other parts of the river, far more extensively than previously understood.





The Neponset River winds through lofts in Lower Mills. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

A study by the US Geological Survey found that 3.7 miles of the river, from the Mother Brook to the Walter Baker Dam in Dorchester, contained PCB contamination. PCBs were commercially manufactured in the United States from 1929 until their production was banned in 1979. Resistant to extreme temperatures and pressure, they were used widely in electrical equipment, hydraulic fluids, and lubricants.

Thomas & Betts later sued other companies that they alleged also contributed to the river's pollution, and in 2019, after a welter of litigation, [a federal appeals court](#) in Boston ruled that other companies had to share in the nearly \$13 million costs of the initial cleanup. With such a complicated history of finding who's responsible for cleaning the rest of the river, the state is now deferring to the federal government, which has much greater legal firepower and ability to assign blame.

"We do think the EPA involvement is helpful," Suuberg said. "We want this cleanup to move as expeditiously as possible."

Establishing Superfund sites can be controversial, as they often inspire fears that having a toxic landmark nearby could hurt property values. But neither Suuberg nor local officials said they were aware of any opposition to the designation.

"We're in full support of it," said Michael Dennehy, town administrator of Milton, which borders a portion of the river. "We have not heard any concerns."

Lower Neponset River Restoration



 A Flourish map

Terry Dolan, secretary of the Lower Mills Civic Association, said it hadn't occurred to her that there could be a downside.

"It should be viewed . . . as a major environmental improvement, a giant step forward in restoring the health of our river," she said.

She and others cited development along the river, such as the recently built Harvest River Bridge that connects Milton and Mattapan, as a promising sign of what a restored river and new civic spaces might look like.

For Ian Cooke, the cleanup is just the prelude to the river's ultimate restoration, which he hopes will include the removal of old, unused dams; the return of significant herring and shad runs; and eventually fishing and swimming.

As he paddled down the tawny river, silently floating beneath graffiti-covered bridges, the growl of passing trains, and other intrusions from the surrounding cityscape, there were signs that the challenges of restoring the river may go way beyond removing PCBs.

Caught in the dilapidated remains of the Tileston & Hollingsworth Dam between Milton and Hyde Park was an old, rusting refrigerator and other refuse. Nearby, along the river's muddy banks and old barbed wire fencing, sewage still occasionally flows from storm drains, especially after a heavy rain.

“We have to start by fixing the problems of the PCBs,” Cooke said. “Then we can address the rest and work on creating a healthy river that everyone can use.”

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