



SEARCH
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Go

[Home Page](#)

[Essentials](#)

[CyberSurveys](#)

[Forums](#)

[Photo Galleries](#)

[Weather](#)

[Horoscope](#)

[Lottery](#)

[Giveaways](#)

[Crossword](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Autos](#)

[Autos Insider](#)

[Drive](#)

[-- Car Reviews](#)

[-- Latest Deals](#)

[-- Model Reports](#)

[Joyrides](#)

[Business](#)

[Business](#)

[Money & Life](#)

[Careers](#)

[-- Find a Job](#)

[Real Estate](#)

[-- Find a Home](#)

[Metro](#)

[Metro/State](#)

[Wayne](#)

[Oakland](#)

[Macomb](#)

[Livingston](#)

[Commuting](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[-- Death Notices](#)

[Schools](#)

[Special Reports](#)

[Editorials](#)

[Columnists](#)

[Detroit History](#)

[Nation/World](#)

[Nation/World](#)

[Politics/Gov](#)

[Census](#)

[Health](#)

[Religion](#)

[Technology](#)

[Sports](#)

[Sports Insider](#)

[Lions/NFL](#)

[Pistons/NBA](#)

[Red Wings/NHL](#)

[Tigers/MLB](#)

[MSU](#)

[U-M](#)

[More Colleges](#)

[High Schools](#)

[Golf](#)

[Motor Sports](#)

[Outdoors](#)

[More Sports](#)

[Scoreboards](#)

[Entertainment](#)

[Entertainment](#)

[Events](#)

[-- Event Finder](#)

[Movies/TV/DVD](#)

Friday, May 2, 2003



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

In the background, behind a bulk carrier, is where Dow will use a hydraulic dredging machine to remove contaminated soil.

Dow to dredge St. Clair River

Company will remove pollutants

By Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

HARRISON TOWNSHIP - Dow Chemical Canada Inc. will dig up nearly 45,000 cubic feet of contaminated sediment this summer on the bottom of the St. Clair River as part of a massive cleanup that Macomb County environmentalists are praising.

The contaminated sediment contains mercury and chlorinated organic compounds that pose numerous health problems if ingested through drinking water or by eating fish.

The sediment has been sitting on the bottom of the river for decades after Dow Chemical dumped waste into the waterway in the 1950s and 1960s, when industry regulations were lower.

"It's like they are redeeming their sins of the past," said



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Pollution experts Doug Martz and Linda Schweitzer tested the water after a pilot dredging by Dow and found the contamination did not spread downstream.

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- [Employment](#)
- [Homes or Apartments](#)
- [Shop Online](#)

Home Delivery Center

- [Start home delivery](#)
- [Renew subscription](#)
- [Customer service](#)

Macomb County

- [Macomb County index for Friday, May 2, 2003](#)
- [Motorist not guilty of killing road worker](#)
- [Dow to dredge St. Clair River](#)
- [Agency finishes clean of canals](#)
- [Bridge openings targeted for Sept.](#)
- [Macomb Briefs](#)
- [Lenox landfill to store ash](#)
- [Mount Clemens ends trash deal](#)
- [Sterling Heights explicit gag order](#)
- [Critical bridge to be fixed in Lenox](#)
- [Condos planned at Ut plant site](#)
- [Grim economy has bright spot: County bars thrive](#)
- [Other counties see jump in sales](#)
- [Macomb Township leads in homes built](#)
- [Macomb People in the news](#)
- [Macomb week ahead](#)
- [Motorists await wider 53](#)
- [Projects get \\$5 million grants](#)
- [Across Macomb County](#)

Sections for this date

Friday, May 2, 2003

Select index

[Home Finder](#)
[Listings](#)
[Hotels & Drinks](#)
[Restaurants](#)
[Wine Report](#)
[Books](#)
[CD Reviews](#)
[Escapes](#)
[Casino Guide](#)
[Michigan's Best](#)
[Living](#)
[Lifestyle](#)
[Homestyle](#)
[Fitness](#)
[Forums](#)
[News Talk](#)
[Autos Talk](#)
[Wings Talk](#)
[Lions Talk](#)
[Pistons Talk](#)
[Tigers Talk](#)
[Big 10 Talk](#)
[High Schools](#)
[Movie Talk](#)
[Tech Talk](#)

Linda Schweitzer, assistant professor at Oakland University who specializes in environmental toxicology and aquatic chemistry.

The \$10 million project will begin next week and will be completed in eight to 15 weeks, said Catherine Creber, remediation leader at Dow Chemical Canada. The cleanup area is about 2,000 feet long and about 115 feet off the Sarnia, Ontario, shoreline, where Dow Chemical Canada is based.

Although the project is north of Macomb County, Macomb activists have been closely monitoring Dow's dredging plans because the river flows into Lake St. Clair.

Members of the Macomb County Water Quality Board are working with Dow to ensure the dredging won't stir up contaminated sediment that could travel downstream into the 13 drinking water intakes along the river.

"We just want to make sure they do it right," said Doug Martz of Harrison Township, chairman of the Macomb board, "because we have 6 million people drinking water downstream."

Larry Goodin, owner of Travis Restaurant in Harrison Township, used to be an avid fisherman. But concerns about contamination forced him to abandon his fishing poles. He won't eat fish caught in Lake St. Clair, nor will he let his five grandkids swim in the water.

"I'm all for Dow cleaning up the water as long as they don't push all that stuff downriver," said Goodin, 56.

Carcinogens present

The carbon molecules in the sediment are carcinogens, said Carl Freeman, a Wayne State University biologist. During dredging, sediments can be stirred up and filter feeder organisms such as zebra mussels could eat them.

A fish that eats the zebra mussel would become contaminated as well, Freeman said, and contamination levels could become highly concentrated inside fish because they are stored in fats. A person who eats the fish would then have the contaminants as well.

"Your probability of getting cancer goes up considerably," Freeman said. "That's why you are concerned any time there is a dredging."

Fisherman Bruce Terwilliger, 69, of St. Clair Shores calls Dow's efforts productive.

"For years that stuff has been dumped in the river and it all eventually flows downstream," said Terwilliger, who frequently boats to Canada. "Dow Chemical is trying to clean it up ... the best way that it can be done."

Last summer, Dow did a pilot dredging project in the St. Clair River just south of the current site to test out its high-tech dredging equipment before the major cleanup.

The hydraulic dredging machine operates like a vacuum, sucking sediment and pumping it to shore. It's then filtered out of the water and shipped to a landfill. The water is cleaned to meet drinking water standards before it goes back into the river, Creber said.

Creber said the pilot project gave Dow the confidence to begin the major dredging this summer.

Water tested

Martz, Schweitzer and Freeman tested the water after the pilot project and found the contamination did not spread downstream.

Martz has worked with Creber in setting up a notification system to

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local drinking water plants, the Coast Guard and hazardous waste teams if an accident should occur.

"It's great that Dow has taken the lead to clean up for past mistakes," said Sarah Roberts, Macomb County community organizer for Clean Water Action in Clinton Township. "But corporations need to make sure things like this never happen again."

Dow Chemical Canada primarily manufactures plastics. The chemicals that were used in the past, such as mercury, are no longer used today, Creber said.

The idea for the cleanup project came in the 1980s, when new management at the Dow plant addressed environmental issues, Creber said. The goal was to prevent further air and water contamination and to clean up problems of the past when the environmental effects of these chemicals were relatively unknown. Dow set aside \$100 million for these environmental projects, Creber said.

Since the contaminants are buried in sediment that is 6 inches to 2 feet deep, they pose little immediate health concern, Creber said. But the sediment could be stirred up and contamination could be spread by large ships passing through or a massive ice floe, she said. Dow didn't want to take that chance, Creber said, and decided on the removal.

Macomb officials became interested in Dow's dredging practices in the 1990s.

Dow first did a smaller dredging project for six days in the spring of 1996 after a patch of soft, tar-like material was discovered in the river. Creber said Dow cleaned up the substance that appeared to have spilled into the river from a drain located near a Sarnia landfill.

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