

Much of Kalamazoo River to Open, Two Years after Spill

MIKE HOUSEHOLDER, Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Nearly all of the Kalamazoo River is being reopened for recreational use and the cleanup of a massive Enbridge Inc. oil spill nearly two years ago is in its final stages, federal, state and local officials announced Thursday.

Thirty-four miles of the river and all of Morrow Lake are reopening, Susan Hedman, a regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, told The Associated Press.

"We're at a really good juncture here. Much of EPA's work is complete," said Ralph Dollhopf, coordinator of the EPA team overseeing the cleanup, after a 30-inch pipeline ruptured in July 2010, spilling 840,000 gallons of heavy crude.

A more than 2-mile stretch of the river that was closed to the public reopened earlier this year. Thursday's announcement leaves only a quarter-mile stretch of the delta between the river and Morrow Lake still closed, and EPA officials said they expect that section to reopen in the next few weeks after some final cleanup work.

"We've gone about it systematically and methodically. ... It's been a successful cleanup and a complicated one, and we think it's gone well," Dollhopf said when asked to reflect on the amount of time it took to get to this point in the cleanup process.

The EPA's efforts over the past year largely have focused on removing submerged oil from the river bottom, a process Dollhopf said was difficult since the oil is under the surface. It forced those tasked with the cleanup to develop ways to recover the oil without causing additional harm to the environment, a goal Dollhopf is proud to say was accomplished.

"The river seems vibrant. It seems alive. There are many fish, wildlife, birds of prey. ... When the public goes out there, I think they're going to be pleased to see that not only has the oil been cleaned up, but the integrity of the river system has been protected in the process," said Dollhopf, who has been out on the river in a small boat in recent weeks trying to gain the perspective of a public visitor.

"They really won't see the effects of the cleanup," Dollhopf predicted. "They'll see the river as they remember it, or perhaps even better."

The next big announcement in the spill aftermath will come from another federal agency, the National Transportation Safety Board, which expects this summer to wrap up its investigation of what caused the leak.

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It's still not known what caused the pipeline to rupture near Marshall in Calhoun County, about 60 miles east of Grand Rapids. The pipeline extends from Griffith, Ind., to Sarnia, Ontario, and is operated by Enbridge, which recently announced plans to enlarge the pipe so it can carry more oil. The Calgary, Alberta-based company has estimated cleanup costs at about \$700 million.

Enbridge will continue to perform oil recovery operations, even after the reopenings occur, under the direction of the EPA and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, both of which point out that people may encounter ongoing work activities at some locations along the river.

The state Department of Community Health has said it anticipates no long-term hazards to humans from the spill, and tests have turned up no oil in drinking water wells near the river or elevated levels of oil-related air pollution.

Health agencies recommend washing skin and clothes with soap and water as soon as possible after coming in contact with oil, and stations with cleaning wipes have been set up near kiosks at launch stations to clean skin and boating equipment.

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