

St. Clair River cleanup lags: Recent spills into river set back area of concern delisting for two years

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Canada lags behind the U.S. in cleaning up the Great Lakes and the St. Clair River is a good example, an environmental group says.

This Month marks the 10th anniversary of an agreement signed by Canada and Ontario to restore 17 degraded "Areas of Concern" in the Province, including the St. Clair.

Yet just two of the 17 areas have been restored, federal funding has been reduced and support for public advisory committees cut, said Anne Mitchell, of the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy.

"Canada is often seen as a world leader on environmental issues. However, our government's lack of support to seriously tackle the problem... is a national embarrassment," said Mitchell, who noted U.S. leaders met in Washington to discuss Great Lakes progress.

Heavy investment by local industry and an international effort headed by the Binational Public Advisory Council (BPAC) has had some success at restoring the St. Clair River.

Achievements include the removal of historic contamination from the river bottom and improvements to wildlife habitat and municipal sewage discharges.

But delisting will remain a pipe dream until chemical spills to the river are brought under control, Mitchell said.

What's needed, she believes, is legislation requiring companies to invest in systems to contain spills on-site and prevent them from contaminating drinking water.

A spill to the river of nearly 300 kilograms of toxic vinyl chloride following a power failure at Sarnia's Royal Polymers last August was evidence that self-regulation isn't enough, she said.

"I think the community assumed that somehow or other these things were being taken care of. To find out there was no backup protection systems in place was a wakeup call, for sure."

The international Joint Commission first identified the Areas of Concern in 1985, including 12 in Canada, 26 in the U.S. and five with shared responsibility.

Just last year, local officials on both sides of the river were optimistic the St. Clair was close to meeting the nine criteria necessary for delisting.

But the Royal Polymers spill followed by a Feb. 1 spill of solvents at Imperial Oil have set the plan back at least two years, according to Beta Trebics, co-chairperson of BPAC.