

## **Cleaning up St. Lawrence still a work in progress**

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While the U.S. prepares to pour billions of dollars more into environmental clean-up operations, a local group continues to "peck away" at long-standing concerns on their side of the St. Lawrence River.

"Problems in the Great Lakes are only growing worse," said Anne Mitchell, executive director of the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy.

"If we are to preserve the lakes to protect our drinking water and fresh water fisheries, we must act quickly before it is too late," she said.

Mitchell lamented the St. Lawrence "Area of Concern" remains an environmental hotspot, despite the Canada-Ontario Agreement - of 10 years ago" to restore the area.

Meanwhile, U.S. President George W. Bush pledged to increase spending.

Rick Eamon, the first chair of the St. Lawrence River Remedial Action Plan's (RAP) technical steering committee, agreed the river bottom remains to be cleansed of years of pollution.

"There hasn't been anything done, other than collecting samples and doing public consultations," Eamon said.

While the RAP has relied on limited government funding during an era of government restraint, the U.S. government has strong-armed corporations into doing their share.

Across the river, Eamon said General Motors has -- by law -- donated millions to clean-up sediments containing PCBs left by its Massena operation.

Meanwhile, there are still contaminants left on the bottom of the river along Cornwall's waterfront by a departed company, Courtaulds.

"It certainly is a different approach," said Eamon, who was the first president of the St. Lawrence River Institute of Environmental Sciences, which was created in response to the river's Area of Concern.

It's not fair to compare these two sites, said Elaine Kennedy, a member of the St. Lawrence Restoration Council, which oversees the RAP.

"The difference with the U.S. sites is they had a very high level of PCBs in the sediments over quite a large area," Kennedy said.

"So they do a lot of dredging, and spent millions. On our side, the contamination is not as big," she said, adding that a layer of clean sediment on top is acting as a sort of buffer.

The Institute's general manager and research scientist, Dr. Jeff Ridal, said there are no quick-fix solutions.

"We have to recognize that (many of) the problems dealing with the St. Lawrence River are complex -- it's a legacy of 50 years-plus and even 100 years of industrial impacts," said Dr. Ridal.

"We can't fix this overnight,"

As a result, research continues to be a focus point involving the institute and its many partners, including the Raisin Region Conservation Authority, the City of Cornwall, the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry and the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne.

A recently introduced study, involving the movement of a dominant fish species, the walleye, is expected to shed light on the location of mercury sediments.

"If we knew the answer we could pinpoint the smoking gun and then we could do the steps to contain it," Ridal said.

Even if hotspots are identified, it doesn't mean a costly clean-up project is the answer, Kennedy added.

Perhaps one example is not allowing boats to put down an anchor into certain areas where it might stir up sediments," she said.

Some success has been achieved, and recognized by Mitchell's watchdog group.

RAP implementation coordinator, Chantal Whitaker, said their work is bearing results.

"The St. Lawrence, specifically, is not falling behind in its attempt to address the RAP recommendations," Whitaker said.

"The provincial and federal governments have conveyed to us we are going to be one of the next Areas of Concern to be delisted just based on the progress we have made."

For example, several years of restoring the tributary rivers entering the St. Lawrence appears to have reduced the level of E. Coli, Ridal said. As a result, Charlottenburgh Park -- its beach waters once ravaged by E. Coli -- will be reopening, possibly this spring.

Despite the difference between U.S. and Canadian philosophies, Kennedy said federal and provincial government funding is lacking for sewage treatment infrastructure, which sorely needs more of a capital commitment.

Denis Sabourin, administrative assistant for Stormont Dundas and Charlottenburgh MP Bob Kilger, said the MP needs time to study the issue before commenting on funding.