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'Independent study' set for Smith-Douglass

By JODY BOURNE — Community Editor

PONTIAC — Looking for ammunition in their efforts to clean up a hazardous waste site in Reading Township, Livingston County officials Thursday authorized an independent study.

The site contains acidic ponds, asbestos and low-level radioactive materials. The imminent threat is one particular pond which is separated from Phillips Creek, a tributary of the Vermilion River, by a narrow berm. If the berm is breached, it could raise river levels as much as 10 feet for several miles and kill fish and other aquatic life as far as 10 miles downstream.

The courts have absolved prior owners of responsibility for the cleanup, leaving state agencies and area governmental bodies holding the bag. Last year Sen. Dan Rutherford (R-Chenoa) proposed using a \$1 million membership initiative grant for the cleanup, but Gov. Rod Blagojevich froze those monies citing the budget crisis.

The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency has conducted three studies of the site and says \$5.5 million is needed to completely eliminate the problem. But Illinois has no money to spare.

Nothing has happened since, and Livingston County officials are tired of cooling their heels.

"I do believe if the current governor hadn't terminated the funding that was earmarked for that project that something would have started out there," said Jon Goembel (R-Fairbury), chairman of the Agriculture & Zoning Committee, which oversees such matters.

The study will be conducted by Gary Deigan of Deigan & Associates, the environmental engineering firm that monitors the Livingston and Streator landfills for the county, at a cost not to exceed \$3,000.

Deigan will conduct up to five tests on the site, including testing water quality in Phillips Creek both upstream and downstream of the berm. He will also provide an analysis of the IEPA's previous three studies for the board.

The aim is for a prioritization of and cost estimate for what must be done at the site. After that, county officials can begin looking at how to fund the work.

Calling the current situation at Smith-Douglass a "band-aid," County Board Chairman Jeanne Rapp (R-Pontiac) said it is the county's responsibility to find out what its options are.

“If we can’t get help from the Illinois EPA then maybe we need to go to the federal EPA,” she said.

Site history

The 124-acre Smith-Douglass site was initially a surface coal mining operation, and early in the 1900s was mined for clay used in a tile manufacturing operation on the property. The combined mining resulted in a large strip mine pond.

In 1945 the site was sold and a fertilizer manufacturing plant was built there, using phosphate ore mined in Florida and phosphoric acid produced at the Livingston County plant.

The process generated tons of waste gypsum slurry that was discharged into the strip mine pond and eventually rose to be a 60-foot high 40-acre gypsum pile surrounded by two large ponds. The pond water shines an iridescent green due to single-celled algae – the only life in the pools.

Site ownership changed several times until 1985 when the final owner, Smith-Douglass, declared bankruptcy and was allowed by the courts to abandon the property and leave tons of hazardous waste on site.

Because of the risks presented by the acidic water and low radioactivity of the gypsum pile, the site was sealed by the IEPA in 1988. In 1989, the Illinois EPA removed thousands of gallons of hazardous waste.

In 1993, Livingston County reached an agreement with a salvage company to clean up the industrial portion of the site in exchange for salvage rights. However, while the company demolished some of the ramshackle buildings and removed salvageable material, it also left behind a large amount of demolition debris.

In 1999, a site investigation determined the narrow berm, which holds back as much as 70 million gallons of acidic water with a pH the equivalent of vinegar, was in danger of collapse. The berm was reinforced with large rocks only to have much of the work washed away by heavy rains later that same year. A second effort to reinforce the berm was made in fall 2000, an effort which included relieving pressure on the berm by pumping approximately 12 million gallons of acidic water into a holding pond on top of the gypsum stack. Over the winter, much of the water seeped through the stack back into Fresh Pond, which by April 2001 had risen to within four feet of the top of the berm.

In 2002, Allied Waste offered to move clean demolition debris and gypsum from the site into the emptied pond basin then cap it off with clay as part of an agreement to allow expansion at the Streator Landfill. However, work was halted in March 2003 after workers discovered asbestos tiles mixed in with the debris.