

[Lynch, community leaders, seek to unclog delay in Neponset cleanup](#)

By Cara Bayles, Town Correspondent
December 16, 2010 09:56 AM

Every time a large rainstorm forces water over the Neponset River dams, Rosanne Foley winces.

"I just think of the pollution that still hasn't been addressed that might be spreading downstream," said Foley, the director of the Dorchester Environmental Health Coalition. "I just wish we could have this addressed already."

In the spring of 2009, a community process brought about a hard-fought consensus on what to do about the river, but addressing the water contamination has been a slow process, blocked by bureaucracy.

The pollution is concentrated in the Lower Neponset, affecting the waters near Dorchester, Mattapan, Hyde Park, and Milton. In 2002, during a study on ways to restore fish-spawning runs, the Army Corps of Engineers discovered that the water and soil were polluted with polychlorinated biphenyls, manufactured chemicals which have been linked to cancer, weakened immune systems, and inhibited childhood development.

Further study by the US Geological Survey found the chemicals were collecting behind the Tileston and Hollingsworth Dam, which straddles the river between Hyde Park and Milton, and the Baker Dam in Lower Mills.

In 2007, the Department of Public Health announced that white suckers from the Neponset shouldn't be consumed, citing the fact that the bottom-feeding fish contained unsafe levels of the chemicals.

A coalition of neighborhood activists formed a citizens-advisory council, with the goal of coming up with a plan to improve the quality of the river. After 10 months, they agreed to address both the pollution and spawning runs by cleaning up the PCBs, then removing the T&G Dam and building a fish ramp so spawning shad and herring could pass over the Baker Dam.

They agreed on a plan in April 2009, and said they would meet again within a year to go over the project's progress.

They are meeting for the first time in January.

"It's very slow, I admit," says Steve Pearlman, advocacy director for the Neponset River Watershed Association. "We told people, 'We don't really have anything to report yet, so we'll call when we do.' And now we think we do have some positive developments that we can tell them about."

The biggest delay has been awaiting the release of a US Geological Survey report, which identifies the landowners responsible for the PCB pollution. The report was finished in draft form more than a year ago, but was held up in bureaucracy and has not yet been officially published.

The pollution needs to be cleaned up before the dams can be removed and adjusted, and Pearlman said his group is hoping the report will prompt the responsible parties to pump some private money into the cleanup project, which will cost at least \$7 million, according to a [2008 estimate from the consulting group Milone & MacBroom](#).

US Representative Stephen Lynch of South Boston, who represents most of the Neponset Valley, has joined the effort, pressuring USGS to fast-track the report.

"We were informed recently that it had been sent to Washington, D.C., for expedited approval. That approval is pending," Lynch said in a statement. "The completion of this study will be an important step in restoring the Neponset River to its natural beauty. We will continue to follow up with the USGS to ensure that the report is released once it is approved."

Another delay is paying for the dam removal and adjustments. The watershed association hasn't applied for federal funding yet because it needs to first square away the project with various state agencies.

Pearlman said the state's Department of Fish and Game recently completed a preliminary design for the fish ramp on Baker Dam, which will help in applying for grants. It also took some time for state agencies to work through disagreement about whether the T&G, which is owned by the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation, is needed for flood control.

"Once we met with the federal funding agencies, we realized there was more work that needed to be done before we could apply," Pearlman said. "We've been working on this for 15 years, and the biggest advance was when we got all these neighborhood associations and condo associations, and environmental groups to all come to an agreement on a plan."

Foley, a member of the advisory committee, is optimistic about January's meeting, and says she has seen many projects slowed to a glacial pace in the wake of the economic recession.

"I'm involved, as a lot of folks are in Dorchester, with a lot of projects that you'd like to see move forward quickly. ... You're talking to someone who co-chaired the Ashmont Station advisory committee," she said of the infamously slow station-renovation project. "So, in comparison, it hasn't taken that long."

E-mail Cara Bayles at carabayles@gmail.com.