

Missoulian

Cleanup of petroleum-tainted sediment to begin on Whitefish Lake

By TRISTAN SCOTT of the Missoulian | Posted: Monday, May 14, 2012 9:30 pm

WHITEFISH – Cleanup crews are scheduled to begin dredging the bottom of Whitefish Lake next week to remove contaminated sediment left from a train car derailment in 1989, when tens of thousands of gallons of diesel fuel spilled into the water.

The Whitefish Lake Institute began reinvestigating the site of the Burlington Northern freight train derailment in 2009 after a lakeshore resident reported seeing an oily sheen along the shoreline. Subsequent water and soil testing revealed the presence of petroleum hydrocarbons, and the local nonprofit group alerted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Between 20,000 and 25,000 gallons of diesel poured into the lake on July 31, 1989, after two full diesel tankers slid down an embankment into Mackinaw Bay, on an unpopulated section of the west shore about 1 1/2 miles north of Whitefish State Park. The disaster prompted the governor to declare a state of emergency in Flathead County, and the lake was closed to the public as cleanup efforts got under way.

Mike Koopal, executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute, said the diesel spill penetrated much deeper into the soils than what the initial remedial investigation determined, causing continued contamination. According to test samples, contaminant levels in the water were 16.8 times higher than federal standards, while contaminant levels in the soil were 8.65 times higher. He requested that the Montana Department of Environmental Quality and the EPA perform a site visit to determine whether additional remediation was necessary.

Koopal also brought the issue before the Whitefish City Council, which unanimously approved a letter drafted by then-Mayor Mike Jensen requesting site cleanup.

“After more than 20 years since the initial spill, the remaining contamination will now be cleaned up,” Koopal said.

Approximately 400 cubic yards of petroleum-contaminated sediment will be purged from the bay using a barge-mounted excavator. Curtains and booms will help prevent the spread of the contaminated soil, which, once removed, will be ferried to the Whitefish City Beach boat ramp, loaded onto trucks and transported to a BNSF facility. It will then be dried and taken by train to a licensed waste facility in North Dakota.

Contractors through Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway will begin removing the sediments in the coming week with EPA oversight, and plan to finish cleanup before peak boating season in July. A boat ramp at Whitefish City Beach will remain closed during the work.

“We’re thankful that EPA and BNSF are cooperating in the best interest of public health and for the ecology of the lake,” Koopal said.

Koopal and Jim Stack, chair of the Whitefish Lake and Lakeshore Protection Committee, met with officials from the city, EPA and BNSF last week to review the cleanup procedures. At the meeting, Koopal raised concerns about the sediment sampling and analysis report and said it potentially fell short of fully conveying the extent of the contamination.

EPA officials agreed, and will require additional testing to determine the effectiveness of the cleanup as the work moves forward.

Stack said previous dredging projects at Lazy Channel and Bay Point have shown that the fine clays in Whitefish Lake have the tendency to remain suspended in the water once disturbed. Stack and Koopal both expressed the need for additional sediment curtains in the lake to contain the water’s turbidity.

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