

DEP Daily Update

Residents Should Continue to Avoid Creek Hit by Chemical Spill in McKean, Cameron Counties

MEADVILLE (July 7) -- The Department of Environmental Protection is reminding the public to continue to stay clear of Sinnemahoning-Portage Creek in McKean and Cameron counties as officials carry on biological assessments of the waterway.

Approximately 48,000 gallons of sodium hydroxide flowed into the creek June 30 when 28 Norfolk Southern railroad cars derailed on the eastern boundary of McKean County near the village of Gardeau, raising pH levels in the water. The pH is a measurement for determining levels of acidity and alkalinity, with a higher pH indicating alkalinity.

DEP and local emergency management officials are cautioning people to stay away from the creek, and to keep children, pets and animals away from the waterway due to isolated pockets of concentrated sodium hydroxide.

"While most of the stream is close to its normal pH levels, there are still spots where small pools of concentrated sodium hydroxide may exist at levels that could cause injury," DEP Emergency Response Manager Dan Holler said. "Stream conditions will be re-evaluated next week, but for the time being people should stay safe by staying away from the waterway."

Other potential hazards that have been identified are possible elevated bacteria levels in the creek due to the extensive fish kill and the imminent removal of an emergency dam that had been constructed shortly after the accident for the purpose of neutralizing the spilled material.

The sodium hydroxide, also known as caustic soda or lye, has had a devastating impact on the creek from Gardeau to just north of Emporium in Cameron County.

A team of DEP biologists is conducting a survey of the stream to ascertain the extent of biological damage. The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission also is conducting an assessment to determine the spill's impact on the fish population.

For more information on water quality, visit DEP's Web site at www.depweb.state.pa.us, Keyword: "Water Quality."