

Chemical Still Polluting Portage Creek



The football-sized area on the Albert Haynes farm in Gardeau that has taken the brunt of the chemical spill and the clean-up efforts that have followed, is just not a nice place to be. Polluted water still runs from Big Fill Run, through the property and into Portage Creek. This photograph, taken Thursday afternoon, shows one of the two dams that Norfolk Southern has constructed with wooden posts and black plastic. The idea is to hold the corrosive water long enough to neutralize its pH level with citric acid (in the submerged bags shown here). Small holes are punctured in the back of the plastic, serving as spillways. Another dam is about 50 feet below this one, where the water spreads out into a marshy, bog-like area. All the vegetation around the site is dead. Hoofallen

Crews are working furiously to clean-up the wreckage left behind two weeks ago when a Norfolk Southern freight train derailed and crashed into the surrounding wilderness.

And as the site itself has progressed from a mangle mass of steel and strewn debris to something that resembles a rural development project, the small stream that borders the crash site still runs orange-red and wrecks of toxicity.

It's anyone's guess as to when that section of Big Fill Run, a tiny tributary that feeds the upper portion of Portage Sinnemahoning Creek in McKean County, will run clean again.

Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) chemistry samples taken as part of its investigation, have not yet been fully-analyzed, according to Tom Randis, a DEP biologist. He suspects the tests will show severely elevated levels of sodium, based on the nature of the incident.

The 200-hundred yard stretch of Big Fill Run that feeds wetlands on the 88-acre Albert Haynes farm and the adjacent Portage Creek, is a 25to 50-foot swath of toxic soup and burned foliage.

Norfolk Southern has built at least two make-shift dams on Big Fill Run by pounding steaks into the mud and stapling thick black plastic in concave fashion across the stream. In front of the dams, red pools of corrosive wastewater are being treated with bags of citric acid to neutralize the water's pH level.

The area, which is haphazardly fenced with orange plastic and yellow tape, is striped with footpaths through the weeds, apparently from Norfolk Southern workers and curious and courageous visitors.

This is where DEP's investigation will begin. Geographically, it may be 50 miles or more before it ends.

Randis said chemical samples will be taken to the mouth of Portage Creek and down the Driftwood Branch of the Sinnemahoning River until a point was reached where the experts agreed no damage had been done.



The right-of-way at the site of the train derailment near Gardeau is nearly cleared of debris, most of which has been dragged down into a field below, where workers were crushing it up and hauling it out Thursday. The area at the bottom of Big Fill Run is not safe to walk in or around. The chemicals from the spill have turned the already-wet area into a mud that's polluted with chemicals and dead plant matter. These photos were taken Thursday, some 14 days after the crash.

DEP, who will likely cite Norfolk Southern under environmental statutes, will compile the damage reports and possibly mandate actions to improve what has been damaged.

Asked how significant the local spill was in terms of its environmental damage and as it relates to similar incidents around the state, Randis said based on his experience the spill was of a "large magnitude on an environmental scale."



Randis said a pollution incident in Center County which occurred several years ago was the only incident in recent history that "comes close" to the local case.

That incident involved Hanover Foods, a company found to be responsible for killing thousands of fish and damaging Sinking Creek in 2004. DEP determined that the company had discharged thousands of gallons of polluted grey water from the company's wastewater treatment facility.

Hanover Foods, located between Spring Mills and Old Fort along Route 45, paid \$400,000 in DEP fines alone.

That incident seems to pale in comparison to the local disaster. An estimated 14,000 fish were killed over a 1.4-mile section of the creek. As many as 35 miles of stream are believed to have been affected here.

Also in Sinking Creek, the stream had returned to normal in six months. Even the most optimistic estimates give Portage Creek no such chance.

