

Leaking rail cars kill fish in creeks

Sunday, July 16, 2006

By Don Hopey, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

State fisheries experts and biologists in hip boots have finished assessing the massive damage done to fish and aquatic life by a Norfolk Southern train derailment that spilled 48,000 gallons of a caustic chemical into high-quality streams in McKean and Cameron counties June 30.

Last week, State Fish and Boat Commission field agents waded through Sinnemahoning-Portage Creek, Driftwood Branch and Sinnemahoning Creek with electro-shocking equipment and nets to determine if any fish survived the slug of sodium hydroxide that poured from three ruptured tank cars.

The stream survey found no fish alive in the 10 miles of Sinnemahoning-Portage Creek downstream from the derailment, and only a very small number of fish alive in the next 20-mile reach of the Driftwood Branch.

The highly concentrated chemical, also known as caustic soda, or lye, and used in drain and oven cleaners, caused thousands of wild brown and brook trout, stocked rainbow and brown trout, bass, catfish, carp and minnows to die immediately as it washed through the formerly pristine and popular streams 150 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.

Fishermen and camp owners in the Sinnemahoning watershed, many from around Pittsburgh, have called the fish kill a tragedy.

Dan Tredinnick, Fish Commission spokesman, said findings from the field survey would be compared with historical field data for those and similar streams. The electro-shocking temporarily stuns fish in a creek so they float to the surface and can be counted, but they recover.

"We'll use the findings and those comparisons to calculate the value of lost aquatic life and recreation," Mr. Tredinnick said. "We do know that what was lost can't be replaced in the short term. It will all be part of any claims we might make."

Previous story

■ [Fishermen mourn toxic spill's mass killing of trout](#)

Information graphic

■ [Electroshocking fish: a survey technique](#)

He said there were no dollar estimates of the damage caused by the derailment. The commission could file a separate monetary claim against Norfolk Southern for the environmental damage or take joint action with the state Department of Environmental Protection, which has finished its independent assessment of water quality and damage to aquatic insects -- mayflies, caddis flies, stone flies -- that are the main food sources for fish in the streams.

DEP biologists found no living aquatic insects in the 7.5 miles of Portage Creek downstream from the spill site, a portion of the stream rated "high quality" and known statewide for its wild brook and brown trout. Samples taken near the town of Emporium, 10 miles downstream from the derailment, showed some life, but "significant impairment compared [with] background data."

Kelly Burch, DEP northwest regional director, said water quality was improving, "but we still have portions of the creek that remain severely affected by the spill."

For more than a week after the accident, sodium hydroxide continued to seep out of the derailment site and into the creek in amounts that violated state stream pollution regulations.

As a result of its stream water testing, the DEP is urging people to stay away from Portage Run and keep children, pets and animals away from the stream in the two-mile section below the derailment because of the continued possibility of encountering isolated pockets of sodium hydroxide in the water. That amends an advisory issued immediately after the derailment that urged people to avoid contact with Portage Run for 10 miles below the accident site.

The Federal Railroad Administration also is investigating the cause of the derailment, and its inquiry is "open and ongoing," according to spokesman Warren Flatau. He said Norfolk Southern was required to provide the agency with a written accident report by the end of the month, which the agency will use to fashion its own accident report.

Mr. Flatau said a railroad administration records check found no previous derailments in the area and "no safety compliance issues on that rail line," which runs through a deep gorge on a steep grade. The rail line is used by two trains a day.

Norfolk Southern's investigation into what caused the derailment of 28 cars, including the three tank cars that leaked, is continuing, according to Rudy Husband, a company spokesman. In a news release last week, the company stated it "sincerely regrets the environmental damage resulting from the derailment, as well as the inconvenience experienced by residents of McKean and Cameron counties."

Mr. Husband said the company was continuing to clean up rail cars from the derailment and to monitor water quality in Portage Run. It has hired an environmental consulting firm to assess the streams and devise a restoration plan. He said Norfolk Southern had tested more than 100 drinking water wells near the derailment and downstream between Gardeau, McKean County, and Driftwood, Cameron County, and "all the samples have come back in acceptable ranges."

While fish kills caused by accidental and intentional stream pollution or disruption are fairly common occurrences, the size and location of this one, in a high-quality watershed, is unprecedented, Mr. Tredinnick said.

There were 288 cases of stream pollution or disturbances investigated by the Fish Commission last year. None involved a railroad derailment.

The commission collected \$208,977.38 in fines and settlements in the 217 cases it has disposed of, an average of less than \$1,000 per incident.

One of the biggest monetary settlements for stream damage was the \$2.25 million Ashland Oil agreed to pay after an oil storage tank collapsed in January 1988 at its Floreffe terminal in Jefferson, spilling 700,000 gallons of diesel fuel into the Monongahela and Ohio rivers.

Lost recreational value, a significant consideration in the fish kill in the Sinnemahoning watershed, is often the major component in assessing fines, penalties or damages.

"It's too early to speculate what will happen on this one, but we're not going to shrug our shoulders on something like this," Mr. Tredinnick said. "These are high-quality streams and it's our responsibility to protect them."

(Don Hopey can be reached at dhopey@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1983.)

[Back](#)