

Biologists say creek water quality near normal

MEADVILLE - Department of Environmental Protection scientists have found pH levels in Sinnemahoning-Portage Creek in McKean and Cameron counties near normal in two days of sampling and analysis. As a result, DEP and local emergency management officials are updating their waterway advisories.

Earlier advisories warned people to avoid contact the full length of the creek. With the latest results, the advisory has shifted to caution the public to avoid the creek starting at the spill area north of Gardeau Village in McKean County and extending south two miles downstream to the county border of McKean and Cameron counties.

In that two-mile stretch, people should stay away from the creek and to keep children, pets and animals away from the waterway as well.

Approximately 48,000 gallons of sodium hydroxide, also known as caustic soda or lye, flowed into the creek when 28 Norfolk Southern railroad cars derailed June 30, raising pH levels in the water. The pH is a measurement for determining levels of acidity and alkalinity, with a higher pH indicating alkalinity.

“We are seeing improvements in the pH levels, but we still have portions of the creek that remain severely affected by the spill,” DEP Northwest Regional Director Kelly Burch said.

In addition to measuring the pH, DEP conducted biological assessments of the creek at several locations, starting at a point above the spill site on Big Hollow Run downstream to its confluence with the Driftwood Branch in Cameron County. The assessments seek to determine the impact of the spill on aquatic life.

Preliminary results of these biological assessments show essentially no living aquatic insects downstream from the spill site for approximately 7.5 miles. Samples collected near Four Mile Run and in Emporium, however, did show living organisms, but the stream was significantly impaired compared to background data. Assessments completed below the Driftwood Branch found the numbers of aquatic insects to be relatively high.

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission is conducting an assessment to determine the effect of the spill on the fish population. DEP and PFBC will continue monitoring the stream conditions and notify the public with any changes.

Norfolk Southern has hired environmental consultants to address environmental issues associated with the spill. In addition, the railroad company is working to remove cargo and debris from the accident site.

For more information on water quality, visit the DEP's Web site at www.depweb.state.pa.us, keyword “Water Quality.”