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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "PROTECT RIVER KEEP LEAD OUT OF THE PISCATAQUA" NSY
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Editorials

Protect river

Keep lead out of the Piscataqua

While the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard's action to stop lead from leaching into the Piscataqua River has been laudably resolute, the recent study detecting concentrated amounts of the metal in water near the yard's Superfund site has raised several nettlesome questions.

After the Superfund site at Sullivan's Point was remediated and capped in 1993, who would have expected the U.S. Navy's preliminary study conducted in September to find such high levels of lead in the Piscataqua River?

At the shipyard

No matter how unexpected and unwelcome its presence, lead — a vestige of the days when the site was used to store batteries at the yard — appears to have infiltrated the tidal river's food chain.

We are alarmed by samplings of juvenile lobsters showing high levels of lead.

We are dismayed because we had been told early on by the Navy not to worry — everything at the Superfund site has been running well under watchful eyes. And we had been told by the shipyard's commander, Capt. Tom Williams, as recently as three weeks ago that the Superfund site was problem-free.

Now we are told that lead is showing up in young lobsters at a level 10 times that of other shipyard sites in the nation and 100 times higher than other sampled locations along the Piscataqua River.

The Navy has exhorted assurances that it has acted to prevent further contamination. A retaining wall is being constructed to staunch the flow of contaminants into the river.

But what the Navy and the EPA also have done is to leave us in the dark over the safety of area fishing waters and whether the lobsters trapped there for the local market are safe to eat.

To the Navy's credit, shipyard officials alerted the EPA and ordered the retaining wall be built as soon as erosion of the bank running along the site was discovered.

The Superfund site at Sullivan's Point has been capped since 1993. The question begging to be asked is, of course, why have there been no tests of those waters until now?

Didn't EPA and shipyard officials want to know the efficacy of their site remediation or whether the cap they installed actually worked?

The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard has left an indelible mark on the Seacoast, shaping the lives and welfare of people who have lived here during the past two centuries.

As important as the shipyard is to our local economy, the fishing industry is no less venerable or valuable to the Seacoast's welfare. And just as the shipyard fights to minimize its vulnerability to future military base closings, the federal government and the fishing industry fight to maintain healthy, viable stocks.

The fishing stocks of the Piscataqua — a tidal river whose waters flow up and down the Atlantic Coast — must be protected at any cost if New Hampshire and Maine's signature industry is to continue thriving.

We are heartened to hear the September study was just the beginning of a series of tests to be conducted over the next five years.

Perhaps it will in some way mitigate the shipyard's failure to monitor the site adequately over the past six years.

Meanwhile, officials of the shipyard and the EPA must hasten their efforts to assess the impact lead has had on the Piscataqua and determine whether the safety of seafood harvested in that area has in any way been compromised.

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