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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "ALL IS NOT WELL AT THE SHIPYARD" NSY PORTSMOUTH ME
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Reader Commentaries

Friday, December 10, 1999

Editorial Response

All is not well at the shipyard

By Steve Haberman, Field Director

Seacoast Anti-Pollution League

Portsmouth

[Main Reader
Commentary
Page](#)

In response to the editorial that appeared in your newspaper on Nov. 19, the Seacoast Anti-Pollution League joins you in the concerns you expressed over eating any marine life taken from the Piscataqua River, particularly from the area around the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard.

SAPL has repeatedly called for tighter regulations governing the consumption of both shellfish and fish taken from that area. While consumption of mussels and clams from the Piscataqua is currently banned, there have been only conditional warnings issued by the states of Maine and New Hampshire about lobster consumption and concerns voiced about the health risks associated with only some species of fish that may be taken from the harbor.

We also fear that you may have been misled into thinking that the construction of an anti-erosion barrier in the area of the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office where lead batteries once littered the ground, is sufficient protection against the contaminants that are seeping into the Piscataqua at an alarming rate from the shipyard.

In fact, the DRMO is only one of the approximately 24 sites on the shipyard that fall under the federal CERCLA or Superfund law, and lead is only one of the literally hundreds of toxins that are being released into the river every day.

And even at the DRMO, the barrier the Navy has constructed as an interim measure after almost four years of watching the former retaining structure disintegrate, stops only soil erosion in that area. Lead, along with large quantities of other carcinogenic chemicals, continues to flow into the river through underwater

seeps or holes.

It must be remembered that the area we now call the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard was once three islands surrounded by tidal mudflats. Over the years, the Navy filled in those mudflats using virtually anything it could find, including construction debris, acetylene cylinders, barrels of solvents, contaminated dredging spoils from other areas of the facility, incinerator ash, etc.

In reality, the shipyard is little more than an unlined toxic landfill located in the middle of the Piscataqua River, and each day hundreds of thousands of gallons of river water infiltrate that landfill washing as yet unknown quantities of toxic chemicals back into the river. Things are far from under control at the shipyard and if anyone from the Navy has indicated to your staff or anyone else anything to the contrary, he, she or they were simply not telling the truth.

SAPL has been involved since 1995 in the oversight of the process the Navy is using to determine what toxins exist at the shipyard and how best to clean them up. We have been awarded a total of \$100,000, so far, by the EPA to pay the cost of hiring a consultant to review the Navy's work. The organization has also held a seat on the citizens' Restoration Advisory Board since 1995. That group receives periodic updates on the Navy's cleanup work at the Portsmouth yard and reviews the technical data supplied by the Navy, the EPA and the Maine Department of Environmental Protection.

We continued to be disappointed with a process that requires the Navy to determine what portion of the contamination that exists in the Piscataqua comes from the shipyard versus other polluting sources. The Superfund process encourages the Navy to focus more on what its financial exposure ultimately will be than on the overall health of the river and the risks a polluted river poses to the people of this region.

And we also continue to be disappointed in the Navy's attempts to downplay those threats.

Anyone wishing more information on the realities of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Superfund sites can call the SAPL office at (603) 431-5089, write to SAPL, P.O. Box 1136, Portsmouth, NH 03802 or e-mail us at SAPL99@aol.com.

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