



Frequently asked questions:

Milwaukee River floodplain sampling

Recent samples of soil and sediment from the Milwaukee River floodplain indicate the presence of polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs. The sampling area, chosen as the next phase in ongoing river cleanup efforts, covers approximately 4 river miles on the east and west sides of the river between Estabrook Dam and the former North Avenue Dam. The floodplain is largely open to the public and contains walking trails as part of the Milwaukee River Greenway. Officials from federal, state and local units of government are working together to ensure public health and safety and determine appropriate next steps for the area.

What are PCBs?

PCBs are synthetic oils that were widely used as industrial coolants and lubricants until being banned in the U.S. in the late 1970s. These chemicals are very persistent in the environment and tend to accumulate in the body fats of fish, humans and other animals. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency classifies some types of PCBs as probable human carcinogens and high levels of exposure may lead to low birth weights and developmental delays in young children. More information can be found by visiting dhs.wi.gov and searching "PCBs" or by visiting the EPA website, epa.gov/opptintr pcb.

How contaminated is the area?

Preliminary studies have shown PCB concentrations ranging from less than 1 part per million to 24 ppm in surface samples within this section of floodplain.

How does this compare to other areas?

PCB concentrations were higher in Milwaukee River sediments upstream from the Estabrook Park Dam. That area includes Lincoln Park and portions of Estabrook Park, which is upstream of the current sampling area. Surface concentrations of PCBs in the upstream areas ranged from less than 1 ppm to greater than 100 ppm. Phase I and Phase II remediation

work has been successfully completed in the Lincoln Park area by removal of the contaminated sediments such that the levels of PCBs remaining in the sediment will be protective of human health, safety, welfare and the environment over time.

What is the source of the contamination?

The PCB contamination is believed to have come from industries that historically operated along Lincoln Creek. No single source of PCBs to the creek has been identified.

Are there negative effects from coming in contact with the soil?

Although the PCB levels in the floodplain are higher than they should be, they are low enough that no illness to the public is expected. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services recommends avoiding exposure to PCBs when possible because PCBs can build up in the human body over time. The greatest exposure risk from PCBs is through eating fish from the river. Common sense steps to reduce the potential for exposure include not touching soil that could contain PCBs; removing shoes upon entering the home; washing hands with soap and water and cleaning pets, bikes and tools after visiting the area.

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What is being done to solve the problem?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency conducted the floodplain sampling in November 2016 at the request of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources as part of a Great Lakes Legacy Act project. EPA, DNR and Milwaukee County have been working as part of a coordinated effort to clean up residual PCBs in key segments of the Milwaukee River. Most recently, the partners worked together to clean up the contaminated sediments in Lincoln Park from 2011 to 2015. This sampling effort is the initial phase. Once validated sampling results are available, EPA, DNR and Milwaukee County will work together to determine next steps for this stretch of the river.

Can I eat fish caught in the area?

It is best to follow the fish consumption advisories for the area. Pregnant women and small children



should avoid eating fish contaminated with PCBs. Carp in the Milwaukee River in this area contain high levels of PCBs and should not be eaten, at any size. Other fish can be eaten in limited amounts. Visit dnr.wi.gov and search "fish consumption" to learn more about safely eating your catch. Advisories for this area are found under the query for Milwaukee County and the Milwaukee River Estuary from Estabrook Falls to harbor mouth. Advisory signs are also posted in the area.

Can the area still be used for recreation?

DHS health experts reviewed data and research from the Lincoln Park remediation project and elsewhere in Wisconsin. They concluded that the most significant exposure to PCBs comes from eating fish. The amount of PCB that a person might ingest from eating with contaminated dirt on their hands is small compared to eating fish from the river. Because PCBs accumulate in our bodies over time, it is important to reduce exposure, no matter how small. If visitors do touch exposed soil, they should wash their hands, especially before eating. Hikers, runners and mountain bikers using the area should clean equipment that comes in contact with the soil and remove shoes upon returning home.

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