Frequently Asked Questions – Anacostia River Sediment Project

Q: What is the Anacostia River Sediment Project?
A: The "ARSP" is the plan to clean up the bottom of the river. It is following a process similar to the "Superfund" process, but the ARSP is not a Superfund project. The project began in 2014 and the interim cleanup plan for the river is expected to be completed and shared with the public in 2019.

Q: What area does the Anacostia River Sediment Project cover?
A: The study area includes the tidal Anacostia River from the Potomac River to past Bladensburg, Maryland. It also includes Kingman Lake, which is next to Kingman Island, and the Washington Channel.

Q: How big is the Anacostia River watershed?
A: The Anacostia Watershed covers 176 square miles in Montgomery County, Prince George's County and Washington, DC. It is home to 43 species of fish, some 200 species of birds and more than 800,000 people.

Q: What are contaminants?
A: Contaminants are chemicals that are harmful to humans or wildlife. The contaminants of concern include "polychlorinated biphenyls" (PCBs) which were used in electrical equipment until the 1970's; "dioxins" which are a highly toxic compound often produced by waste-burning incinerators; and "pesticides," which are chemicals used to repel pests in agriculture and residential use.

Q: How did the Anacostia River become contaminated?
A: Like most rivers in urban environments, the Anacostia River has a long history of industrial and agricultural activity. Historical and ongoing sources of contamination may include industrial land use, sewer overflows, contaminated groundwater, landfills and runoff from rainstorms. The ARSP includes a search for potentially responsible parties who will contribute to paying for the river cleanup and restoration.

Q: Am I at risk from the contaminants?
A: The ARSP has identified that the human health risks from the Anacostia River are related primarily to eating fish from the river. There is also some risk associated with touching the sediment on the bottom of the river. Health risks increase if these activities occur more frequently. DOEE issues fish consumption advisories and fishing licenses to help people know how many of which fish species it is safe to eat.

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Q: What are the potential risks for wildlife?
A: The ARSP studies evaluated risk to benthic invertebrates (clams, snails, crayfish), birds, mammals, turtles, and fish. There is little to no risk to birds and mammals, and there is limited to no risk to turtles. There is some harm to benthic invertebrates due to exposure to sediment throughout the river. Certain contaminants are found at highest concentrations in fish tissue at the top of the food chain.

Q: What about the water quality of the Anacostia River?
A: For both humans and wildlife, exposure to the Anacostia River sediment poses more risk than exposure to the river water. Water quality is expected to improve considerably since DC Water's Anacostia River Tunnel was put into operation in March 2018. The Anacostia River Tunnel was designed to reduce combined sewer overflows by 81% during phase 1 and by 98% once phase 2 is completed in 2023, resulting in a decrease of bacterial concentrations in the river. DOEE expects the Anacostia River to be safer for boating and swimming in the near future.

Q: Will the river ever return to a state where it is fishable and swimmable?
A: The Anacostia River can presently be used for numerous recreational activities, such as boating and fishing, as long as District fishing advisories are followed for eating the fish. With the completion of DC Water's Anacostia River Tunnel that reduces bacteria entering the river from combined sewer overflows, the river will become even safer for boating and swimming in the near future.

Q: Should we be concerned about our drinking water being contaminated?
A: The Anacostia River contamination does not affect DC drinking water. Drinking water in the DC comes from the Potomac River upstream of the District.

Q: Trash is still a major problem in the river. Is there an effort to instate a bottle bill?
A: There may be new openness to a bottle bill, but leadership and support for such a bill will be largely driven by the community and advocacy groups.

Q: How will the contaminated sediment be cleaned up?
A: The ARSP will propose a variety of methods to address contaminated sediments. These options will potentially include a combination of capping the sediment in place; dredging to remove the sediment and dispose of it at a toxic waste facility; beneficially reusing sediment as fill for certain projects; and monitoring sediment as it naturally recovers.

Q: How soon will the planning be complete?
A: DOEE plans to release a proposed plan for the cleanup in autumn 2019. After a public comment period, DOEE will then release an "Interim Record of Decision" by December 31, 2019. DOEE will continue to monitor the river as initial immediate remedial actions are taken. A Final Record of Decision will be released later on that will lay out long-term management strategies.

Q: How soon will the cleanup start?
A: DOEE will seek to hire contractors for early remediation actions starting in 2020. The cleanup may take several years beyond 2020.

Q: Where does funding for this project come from?
A: The District government funds ARSP. Ultimately, cleanup and restoration costs will be funded by a combination of government funds and payments from the potentially responsible parties. This will become a complex legal process and we are currently working to understand which parties are responsible what contamination.