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For Immediate Release
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Successfully Cleaning Up the Fox River

Neenah—The successful remediation of the most upstream segment of the Lower Fox River has reduced PCB levels in walleye, sediment and water substantially and has given the country one of its largest cleanup successes so far, monitoring shows.

"These results are unprecedented nationally," said Gov. Scott Walker on Thursday morning at a press conference at the former project site along the banks of Little Lake Butte des Morts. "We're seeing big reductions compared to what would have been the case if this remedy had not been done."

The results, conveyed in a monitoring report released this week by the project consultants and by the Department of Natural Resources and EPA, are much better than expected after the first year of monitoring Little Lake Butte des Morts. "This is a great milestone in the recovery of a river that's such an important economic engine and natural resource for this region and our state," said Governor Walker.

PCB levels are down 73 percent in walleye in the Lake Butte des Morts, which extends about six miles from the outlet of Lake Winnebago to the upper Appleton Dam. That's a level that otherwise would have taken 15 to 20 years to achieve naturally if nothing had been done.

If the same level is confirmed next year through sampling the PCB advisory for walleyes would be relaxed for this stretch of the river. This would make the fishery safe to eat, which has always been the goal.

DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp praised the public-private collaboration behind the project's success. GW Partners is the corporation formed by the responsible parties for this part of the river, PH Glatfelter and Wisconsin Tissue Mill's (known as WTM1). It designed and implemented the clean up. DNR and EPA collaborated on oversight and DNR hired Wisconsin-based Boldt Company to work with DNR staff to make sure the work was done correctly and cost-effectively.

"We are very proud that once again, Wisconsin has led the way," Stepp said. "This evaluation confirms that the Record of Decision was on target in terms of the type and level of remediation. We look forward to continuing this collaboration to get the job done."

PCBs, short for polychlorinated biphenyls, are man-made chemicals that have been found to cause a variety of health problems in people, among them including developmental problems in infants and children born to women who were exposed to PCBs, problems with the nervous, immune, circulatory and hormonal systems, and an increased risk of cancer.

Paper companies used PCBs between about 1954 and 1971 to make carbonless copy paper and discharged nearly 700,000 pounds of these chemicals into the Fox River. PCBs were discovered in the Lower Fox River in the 1970s

The dangers posed by PCBs were unknown until the early '70s, but their use and discharge into the environment were outlawed by federal environmental regulations in 1976. The ban was successful, but because PCBs bind to sediment and break down very slowly, they are still found today in the sediment of the Lower Fox River and Green Bay, and in turn, in the fish and other aquatic organisms living there. All stretches of the Lower Fox River carry a fish consumption advisory that advises people to limit the number of meals people eat of several species of fish from the river.

Work began on the remedy for the Little Lake Butte des Morts segment in 2004 following a decades-long process involving steps including determining how much PCB mass needed to be removed from the river, where most of that mass was located, and the most effective way to deal with contaminated sediment in the various parts of the river. DNR and EPA issued a decision in 2002 that concluded that in order to remove fish consumption advisories in the river segment, all sediment containing PCB concentrations greater than 1.0 parts per million must be addressed by removal, capping, or sand covering.

More than 784,000 cubic yards of PCB contaminated sediment was removed, covered with an engineered cap or sand cover. Work was completed in May 2009, and the main staging area has been restored to include native upland plants, wetlands and a meandering stream, according to Gary Kincaid, a DNR engineer involved in oversight of the project.

Also, the average PCB levels in the sediment has been reduced by 94 percent in the project area, achieving the cleanup goal, and the PCB level in the water is down significantly as compared to the expected levels had the project not been done.

Kincaid said that the monitoring will continue, including assessing PCB levels in other fish species, and that it may take several years for environmental officials to have a full understanding of the effects of the remedy. The uniform procedure that Wisconsin and other Great Lakes states use to set fish consumption advisories calls for two years of improved results before consumption advice can be changed and the remediation plan calls for confirmatory sampling.

Work is well underway but has not yet been completed on the other four segments, which stretch from Little Rapids dam to the mouth of the river at Green Bay. The U.S. Department of Justice and the Wisconsin Department of Justice sued a number of responsible parties in a civil action in federal district court in October 2010 in order to compel continued remediation and restoration of the river.

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