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Dredging up the Passaic's tainted past

\$80M PROJECT TO REMOVE POISONED SEDIMENT

By **SCOTT FALLON**
STAFF WRITER

Half of the cancer-causing chemical dioxin that pollutes the Passaic River will be removed under an agreement announced Monday between federal officials and polluters.

During the \$80 million cleanup, 200,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment will be removed from the lower Passaic near the former Diamond Shamrock factory in Newark. The factory once made Agent Orange, the cancer-causing defoliant used in the Vietnam War.

Incoming tides could have spread the contamination as far up-river as the Dundee Dam in Garfield.

The project, on a river often re-

ferred to as one of the most polluted in America, will take several years to complete.

"Today the long era of environmental devastation of the Passaic River is over," Alan Steinberg, the EPA's regional administrator, said at a news conference in Newark. "A new era of environmental restoration of the Passaic River begins."

The agreement ends years of negotiations between the EPA and several companies that have been cited for polluting the river and their successors. The \$80 million will be paid by Occidental Chemical and Tierra Solutions, a company that has inherited the environmental liability of the former Diamond Shamrock plant.

Federal officials said it was the best deal that could be made without going to court.

"I would have liked it to go further in terms of how much would be cleaned up, but this is the best we could get," said Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-Paterson. "I want to go both ways. We have to clean the whole river."

The dioxin was dumped in the river in the 1950s and 1960s as a byproduct of Diamond Shamrock's manufacture of Agent Orange.

Environmental Protection Agency officials said new dredging techniques will ensure that no dioxin will spread upstream during the project to communities in Bergen and Passaic counties.

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The dredging will be done in concert with a study examining the entire 17-mile stretch of the Passaic River and another that looks specifically at the lower 8 miles from the Dundee Dam to Newark Bay.

The remainder of the dioxins is spread through almost every inch of that 8-mile stretch. Last year, an EPA study put the dredging of the entire area at \$2.3 billion.

The state warns against consuming fish or shellfish caught anywhere in that stretch, though authorities say many poor and immigrant families still use the Passaic as an essential source of food. In 2002, a state study found eating just one crab from the river could raise a person's cancer risk for his or her entire lifetime.

Under the first phase of the project, about 40,000 cubic yards of the most highly contaminated sediment will be removed from the river directly in front of where the factory stood.

"It's a small portion, but it's the hottest of the hotspots," said Ella Filippone, executive director of the Passaic River Coalition.

The contaminated sediment will be treated and taken to an as-yet-undetermined landfill that accepts such waste. The first phase will take 2½ years.

In the second phase, which does not yet have a timeline, workers will remove 160,000 cubic yards of sediment in areas directly north and south of the factory.

Workers will place metal sheet piling around an area in the river to segregate sediment before removing it. EPA officials said this will ensure that contaminants will not be stirred up. Clean fill will be placed over the excavated sites.

A secure storage facility will be built somewhere in the Newark Bay area to hold the contaminated material excavated from this area, officials said.

The EPA had pledged to select a cleanup strategy last fall, but agency officials said they needed more time to review the comments they have received about the seven possible cleanup strategies. Those options included a \$900 million plan to entomb the contaminated riverbed under a cap of dirt.

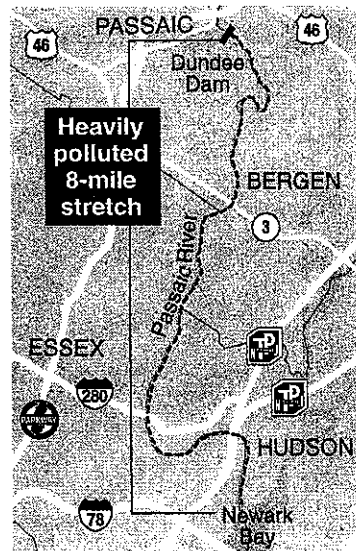
Several environmental groups called the current plan a good first step and said dredging is the best method.

"You have to remove the contaminated sediment," said Jeff Tittel, executive director of the Sierra Club. "You can get to the contamination without re-suspending it. A cap's going to eventually fail."

The NY/NJ Baykeeper group expressed cautious optimism.

"We just fear that this much, much smaller dredging project could hamper a much more comprehensive cleanup of the Passaic River and the Newark Bay," said Debbie Mans, executive director of the non-profit group.

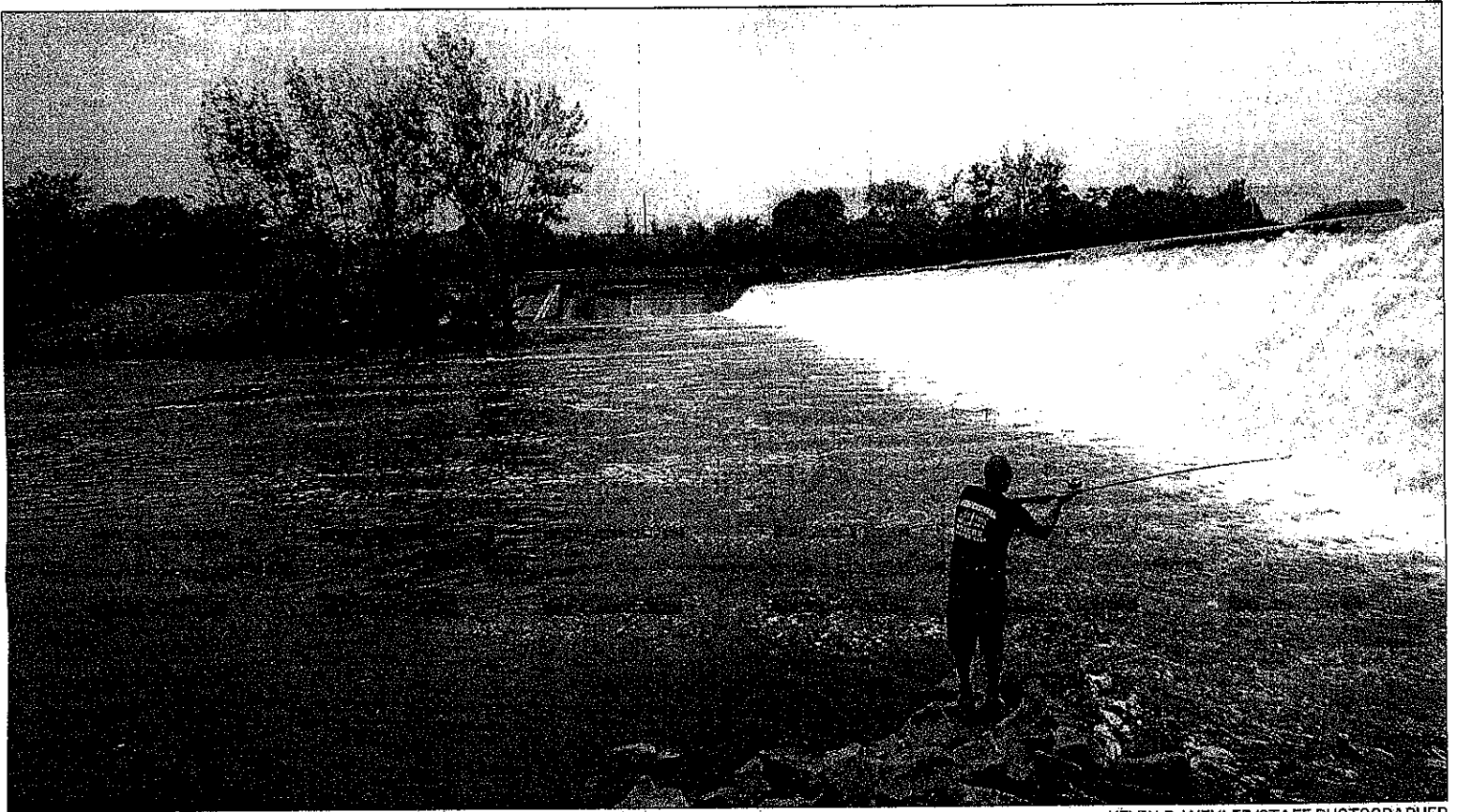
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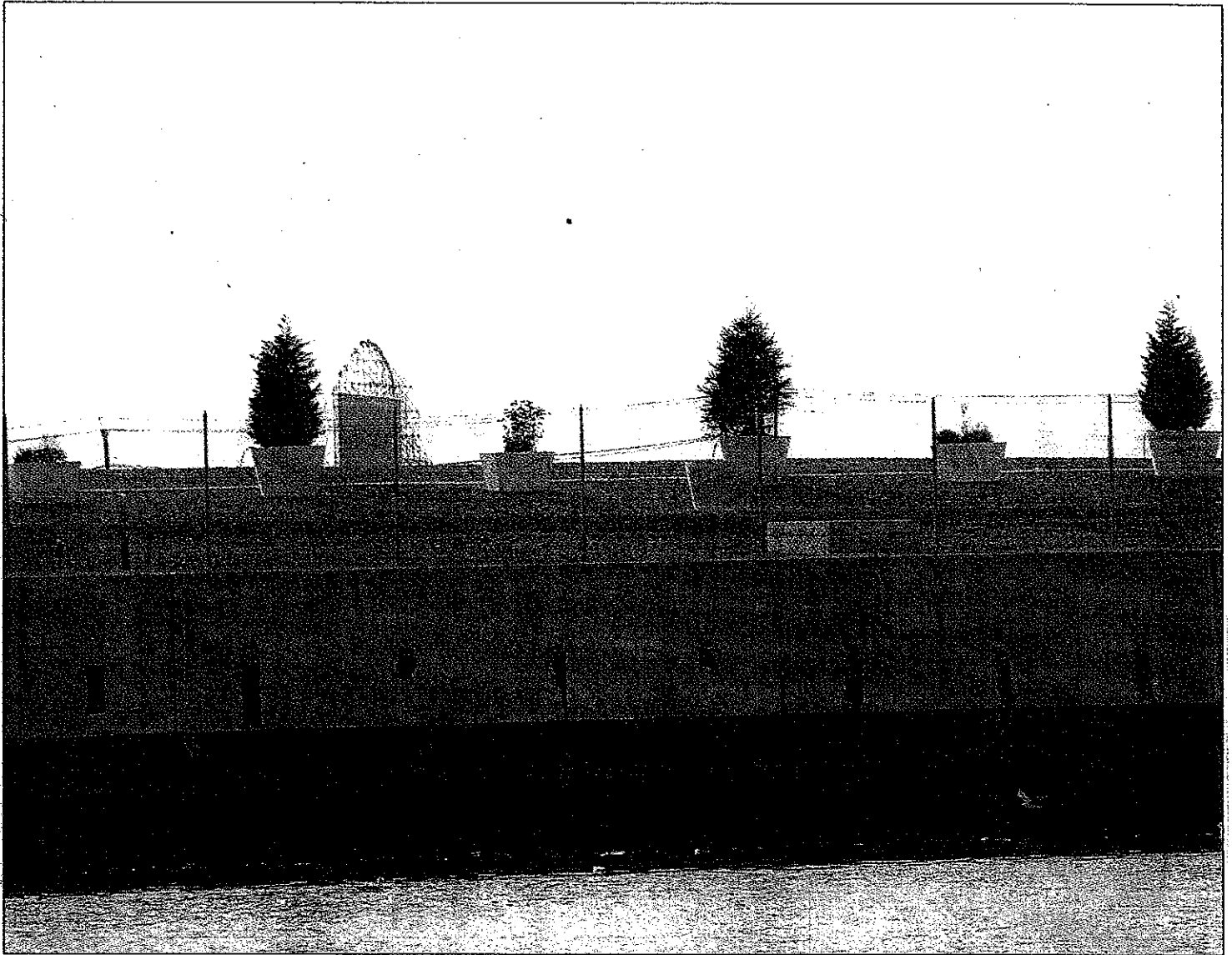


RECORD FILE PHOTO



KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Shawn Schimenti of Garfield fishes in the Passaic River near Dundee Dam. He said he never eats the fish because of the pollution. On Monday, the EPA announced polluters will pay \$80 million to clean up the river near the former Diamond Shamrock plant, where dioxins were found in 1983, top.



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Diamond Shamrock site in Newark, shown in 2004. The plant produced dioxons that have polluted an 8-mile stretch of the river.