

WISCONSIN

## 'Still a lot more to do' as Evers, environmental leaders announce end of Fox River dredging project

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After nearly 20 years of cleanup, the lower Fox River is now nearly clear of industrial contaminants that pose risks to human and animal health, Gov. Tony Evers announced Tuesday.

Evers appeared via Zoom to announce the end of the cleanup to remove PCBs from the river — a process that involved removing sediment, filtering water and capping known sources of the chemical compounds, which cost over \$1 billion.

Evers said that for the 18 cities, towns and villages along the lower portion of the river — which stretches from Lake Butte des Morts to the bay of Green Bay — the end of the cleanup marks a vast improvement and a better future for those looking to recreate, fish and generally enjoy the body of water.

"Our state and future generations of Wisconsinites are certainly better off because of the dedication and sacrifices of those who had the forethought to preserve and protect Wisconsin's vast and vital resources," he said.

Leaders from two of Wisconsin's tribal nations also spoke — Oneida Nation Chairman Tehassi Hill and Gary Besaw, Menominee director of agriculture and food systems. Both said that water is sacred to their nations and must be returned to previous, cleaner conditions in order for it to be usable by future generations.

"Our ancestors utilized these waters for sustenance and travel since we first arrived to these lands, and at one time the waters were clean and pristine, a place where fish were abundant," Hill said. "The completion of this cleanup effort moves us one step closer to fulfilling our given responsibility to care for the waters."

Besaw noted that restorations like this one contribute to maintaining Wisconsin as a world-class place to enjoy the outdoors, and cautioned against allowing pollution to gather in waterways again.

"Let us hope the lessons learned regarding the health of our beautiful environment do not send us down this path ever again," he said.

The cleanup of the lower Fox River began officially in 2003, but concern over pollution dates back to the 1900s, according to the Green Bay Press-Gazette. Concerns then stemmed from dumping raw sewage into the water for much of the 1800s, which led to the development of the Green Bay Metropolitan Sewerage District, now known as NEW Water.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, were highlighted by scientists as an issue in the 1980s. The chemicals are a now-banned organic compound that had a variety of industrial uses, including the production of carbonless copy paper. The compounds end up in the water and sediment, making their way into plants and bugs and work their way up the food chain. They are believed to have a range of effects on animals, including disruption of the reproductive system and cancer.

PCBs entered the Fox River through wastewater from nearby paper mills.

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Secretary Preston Cole said the cleanup has resulted in drastically cleaner water.

"So far, tests show PCB reductions close to 90% in river water and sediment compared to 2006," he said. "That's a big deal for us and the public."

Cole also noted that the companies responsible for the chemicals are paying for the cleanup work, as well as ongoing monitoring for years to come.

He noted that while the river may be cleaner, there is still work to be done before fish consumption limits can be removed for those fishing from the river.

"Although we've done a lot to rectify the past to make our water safer for Wisconsinites, there's still a lot more work to do," he said.

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The project was first announced as completed in August by Andrew Wheeler, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, during a stop in Green Bay. Wheeler said that it was

one of the largest removals of PCBs in the world, removing 6.5 million cubic yards of contaminated sediment from 39 miles of the river, enough sediment to fill Lambeau Field six times.

While the cleanup process was completed, the lower Fox River still remains one of 43 "Areas of Concern" in the Great Lakes and its tributaries in the United States and Canada. There are still issues that need to be addressed before the river can be removed from that list, including loss of fish, plants and other life in the river, deformities or tumors in birds and fish, aesthetic degradation and beach closings.

Wheeler earlier announced the delisting of the Lower Menominee River as an area of concern.

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