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Creosote cleanup

Workers begin picking up railroad ties that litter a Eugene pond

BY DIANE DIETZ

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Workers are starting to clean up acres of dumped railroad ties from in and around a west Eugene pond.

Union Pacific owns the quarter-mile-long, narrow body of water, which is squeezed between the railroad tracks on the east and the acres of cracked-up vehicles in the B & R Auto Wrecking parts yard to the west.

Ducks and frogs and human transients inhabit the banks of the year-round pond. An occasional angler pulls out a bass, according to testimony submitted to the state Department of Environmental Quality.

That's not such a good idea, said Doug Quirke, executive director of the Eugene-based Oregon Clean Water Action Project.

"Railroad ties are coated with creosote," he said. "Having them in water is not a good idea — environmentally — for water quality."

In response to a DEQ query, Union Pacific hired CH2M HILL to analyze the site. The railroad then began working on a site remediation plan, "in concert with additional hydrologic analysis of the pond," railroad spokesman Aaron Hunt said.

The dumped railroad ties came to light in April when Quirke climbed aboard a school bus for Beyond Toxic's Environmental Justice Bus Tour of polluted sites in west Eugene. Riders on the bus could plainly see the ties in the water from their vantage in the bus atop the Maxwell Road overpass, which carries traffic over the Northwest Expressway and the railroad tracks.

The scattered ties are also seen easily on Google Maps. Many are scattered on the pond bank; others float around the perimeter of the pond.

Railroad ties are made when heavy wooden timbers are pressure-soaked in creosote to protect them from insects and weathering, according to Suzana Radivojevic, a Beyond Toxics consultant with a doctorate in wood preservatives and wood chemistry.

The creosote is primarily made up of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs. Creosote can be volatile and leachable, Radivojevic wrote in an opinion for the environmental group. Potential harm to fish and other aquatic organisms are “well evidenced and recognized,” she wrote.

“Especially in sensitive freshwaters, with low current velocities and prevailing anaerobic sediments, use of creosote-treated wood is strongly discouraged,” she wrote.

But DEQ officials concluded harm was unlikely.

“Creosote is very insoluble and, of course, pier pilings have been treated with this stuff for eons. And sediments around pier pilings have been tested and have been found to have very low concentrations of (pollutant),” said Craig Filip, solid waste reduction analyst. “By the time (ties) are taken out of service and piled up, most of the stuff that’s going to leave them already has left and is probably in the railroad bed.”

Radivojevic, however, said creosote on submerged railroad ties would leach slowly but indefinitely since the black tarry substance does not bind chemically with wood.

Quirke said the pond is likely connected with ground water and could carry the toxics away from the site, including toward the south, where an underground plume of railroad pollutants persists in the ground water and radiates under the River Road and Trainsong neighborhoods.

It was a common practice historically to toss spent railroad ties over an embankment, even when a river or other water body was below. The railroads called it “sidecasting.”

But the dumping is no longer allowed, Filip said. “It is illegal disposal of solid waste,” he said. “You can’t just leave railroad ties everywhere, and certainly not in the waters of the state.”

The ties around the west Eugene pond had been there a long time.

Except for transients and the occasional angler, nobody used the land or the pond.

Lane County had lost track of who owned the land and the pond, and Union Pacific didn’t initially know that it owned the land — but eventually the railroad’s real estate department cleared up the mystery, Filip said. UP acquired the forgotten slip of land when it bought Southern Pacific in the mid-1990s.

Upon the UP’s realization that it owned the land, the railroad contacted the DEQ about a cleanup.

“I don’t even think I wrote them a warning letter,” Filip said. “They said, ‘Hey let’s meet. Let’s talk about what we need to do.’ If I’m getting good cooperation from a responsible party, I don’t feel the need to go the enforcement route.”

The DEQ didn’t levy a fine.

UP agreed to finish the cleanup by Halloween, a DEQ document showed.

“It seems like a situation where they looked at it as a no-brainer. ‘We have railroad ties in a pond. They probably shouldn’t be there. We’ll get them out of there,’ ” Quirke said.

This will be the second large-scale railroad tie cleanup in a year.

In 2010, the DEQ notified the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway that it could not leave what turned out to be 36,887 pieces of railroad ties scattered along a 47.6-mile stretch of the Deschutes River, according to the DEQ.

“The ties were ugly. There were thousands of them,” said John Brown, a Eugene real estate broker and avid fisherman who brought the dumping to the DEQ’s attention. “They cut them up and threw them down the bank, thinking they were going to disintegrate. Where do you think that creosote goes?”

The cleanup including removing 6,599 pieces at or below the high water mark.

The job wasn’t easy, railroad spokesman Gus Melonas said. In some places, the ties were on steep slopes, 125 feet above the Deschutes River.

“It is extremely dangerous for crews on these steep slopes,” he said. “We don’t want to put our employees in harm’s way. Therefore we have hired specialists to undertake this extremely labor-intensive process.”

Crews finished most of the cleanup in August, the DEQ said. The railroad recycled the ties at Stella-Jones, a pressure treated wood manufacturer in Duluth.

“I was very pleased, by the end of the day,” Brown said.

Union Pacific’s practice is also to recycle its spent ties.

At the west Eugene pond, there will be limits to the cleanup, Filip said.

“We didn’t ask them to dredge the pond and see what else is down there, because we don’t know that there’s anything down there,” Filip said. “It’s not obvious that there is. It just looks like stuff was kind of put along the banks. We’re just having them pull out what’s visible.”

The pond, in the meantime, is “kind of picturesque,” Filip said. “We saw gigantic frog egg masses under the water and glommed on to branches and things. That’s not a bad indicator of fairly decent water, if frogs can survive in it.”

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