

PCBs IN THE HARBOR

Polychlorinated biphenyls and other contaminants were dumped into the harbor by local industries from 1930s to 1970s.

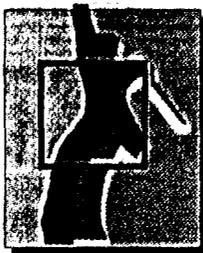
New Bedford Harbor, including the mouth of the Acushnet River, was named as a national hazardous waste Superfund site in 1982. The bottom contains toxic metals and some of the highest levels of underwater PCBs anywhere in the country. Ten years later, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is poised to begin a \$14 million clean up of 5 acres of the most highly contaminated "hot spots." The agency last week unveiled a \$33 million plan to clean another 118 acres of less-contaminated sludge.

PHASE I

4,000 parts per million and up

A \$14 million dredging and incineration plan. Construction is to begin next month.

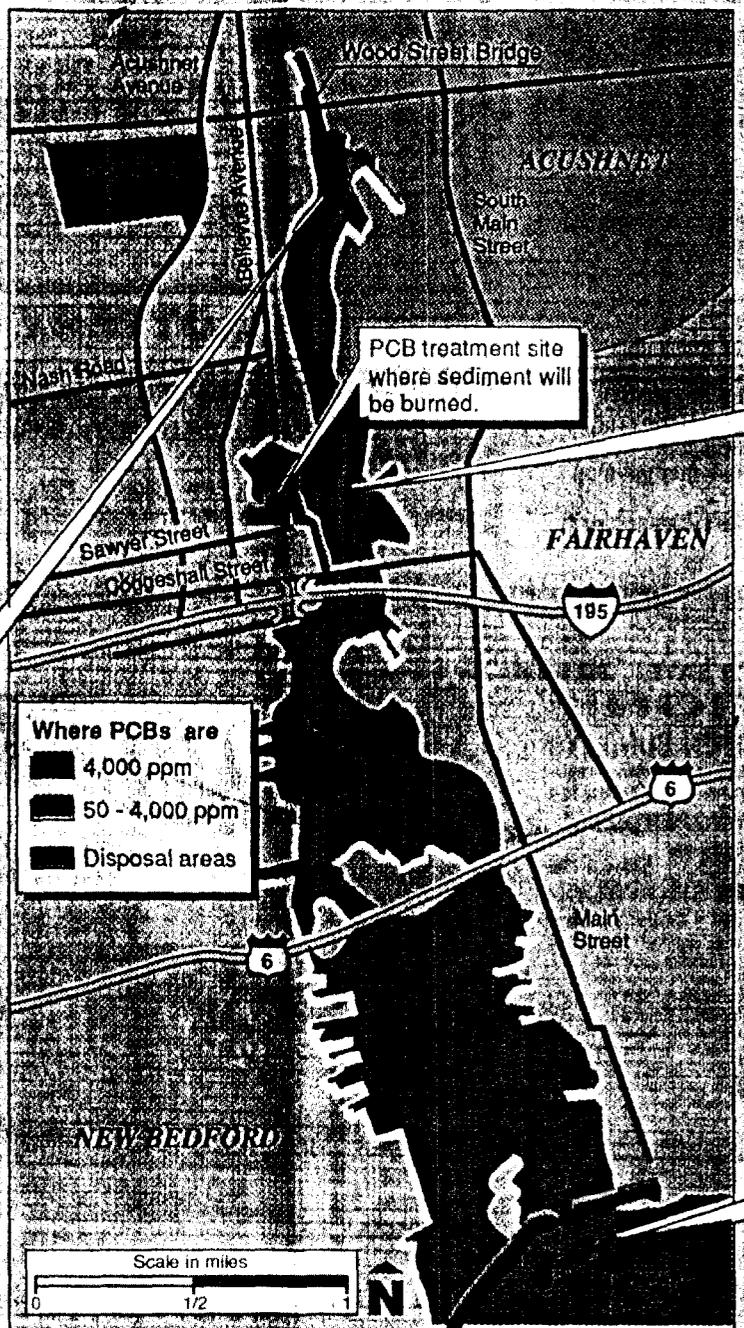
The sediments will be burned to remove PCBs, and then buried at the bottom of Sawyer Street.



PHASE III

0 - 50 parts per million

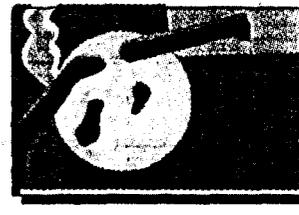
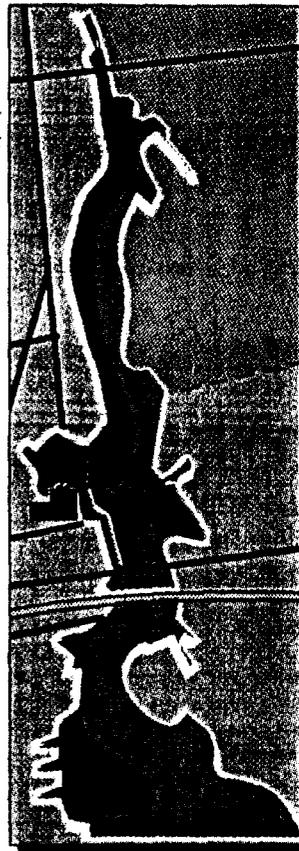
The EPA is currently investigating whether clean up is needed for the rest of the harbor. Most of it is contaminated with low levels of PCBs, up to 50 parts per million.



PHASE II

50 - 4,000 parts per million

A \$33 million dredging project calls for sludge to be drained and buried in coves and harbor banks. These areas will be sealed and grass planted.



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Staff / George A.

EPA weighs PCB danger against money

Dredge-burn plan called 'best balance of trade-offs'

By Natalie White
Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD -- Ten years after New Bedford Harbor earned itself the dubious title of national hazardous waste site, the EPA has come up with a two-phase plan to remove about 90 percent of PCBs and other toxics lingering in the bottom sludge.

Since 1982, more than \$25 million has been spent to study the 1,000-acre site, which includes the mouth of the Acushnet River and portions of Buzzards Bay. Together, the two phases would cost \$47 million, bringing the total cost of cleanup to a whopping \$72 million. And that doesn't

include the cost of land-taking or leasing that will be required along the way.

Actual cleanup has yet to begin. And the studying still isn't over. The agency is still trying to figure out whether a third phase is necessary to deal with the remaining 10 percent of contaminants.

Federal officials describe the second phase, a \$33 million dredging and burial project announced last week, as the "best balance of trade-offs," in a 32-page document also released last week.

Although the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency spends a lot of time talking about how its plans will significantly reduce health risks

to the populations in Acushnet, New Bedford Fairhaven, these statements are underscored another bottom line: money. Or, bureaucratically speaking, "cost-effectiveness."

The \$33 million "preferred alternative" project — which must undergo four months of public comment and then review before being finalized — is the cheapest of nine options studied, excluding the minimal action plan that would have simply involved monitoring and public education.

The plan announced last week calls for dredging 118 acres of less-contaminated bottom sediments and burying the sludge in coves at end of Sawyer Street and across the river in Fairhaven.

The first phase involves burning the most highly contaminated sediment.

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contaminated sludge — dredged from five acres of "hot spots" in the Acushnet River — in an incinerator to be constructed on city-owned property at the foot of Sawyer Street. Preparation begins next month.

The EPA says its preferred alternative offers similar benefits to a plan that would contain the sludge by capping it, but capping would involve disturbing more shoreline because of the anchors needed. And it would cost more.

In fact, by law, the agency has to keep that bottom line in focus and balance health risks against money spent — even if it means ignoring the federal government's own environmental standards. For example, in the case of its own preferred plan, the EPA does not believe the cleanup will reduce PCB levels to 1 part per million in fish and other sealife — as required by federal standards.

In order to do that, the harbor would have to be cleared of all sediments with greater than 1 part per million PCBs, an idea the EPA discards as impractical and too expensive, perhaps costing as much as \$500 million.

"One (part per million) is simply unrealistic," said EPA spokesman Jim Sebastian. "It would be very difficult to implement and prohibitively expensive."

So, the agency proposes to invoke a "fund-balancing waiver" to get around meeting that standard.

The EPA argues that if it went the 1-part-per-million route, it would drain limited national Superfund money, reducing the ability to respond to other national hazardous waste sites and therefore threatening human

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and environmental health in those areas.

The plan chosen, EPA officials said, significantly reduces health risks from contact with the toxic metals and potentially cancer-causing polychlorinated biphenyls.

The EPA's remedy would also "shut off the faucet of PCBs flowing through the harbor into Buzzards Bay," a major environmental concern since the chemical compound is spreading.

When the project is completed, swimming and wading in the harbor and river will again be safe, says the EPA. And the agency hopes some day the PCB levels in fish and other sea life in the inner harbor will diminish so they would once again be edible — but that's far in the future and there are no guarantees.

Although the federal government is suing several companies to recoup cleanup costs — five local electronics manufacturing companies — and some of those companies have agreed to pay millions, the lawsuits are still in court and no money has exchanged hands.

Additional details about proposed harbor cleanup will be available at an EPA-sponsored informational meeting at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at the Days Inn.

Copies of the proposal will be available. Several EPA officials will make presentations and be on hand for questions.

For more information, contact the EPA's Boston office at (617) 565-3423.