

Harbor dredging planned

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EPA: 2 phases to rid area of 90% of PCBs

By **Natalie White**
Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD — The Environmental Protection Agency says it will take six years and cost \$33 million to deal with the bulk of PCB contamination in New Bedford Harbor even after the highly contaminated "hot spots" are dredged and burned.

The EPA today unveiled its "preferred alternative" for the second phase of the cleanup, which includes dredging 118 acres of the harbor bottom and storing the sludge — polluted with heavy metals and from 50 to 4,000 parts per million of PCBs — along the banks of the Acushnet River.

The EPA's plan must go through a four-month public comment period before a final decision is reached.

"What we're talking about here, including the hot spot remediation, is removing 90 percent of the toxics from the New Bedford Harbor," said Jim Sebastian, spokesman for the EPA. "By September, we hope to have an addendum that will deal with the remainder, to see if there is anything further to be done."

Preparations are to begin on the hot spot phase of the project next month at the foot of Sawyer Street, where an incinerator will be set up to burn the sediments by the end of 1992 or beginning of 1993. The EPA estimates burning will take about four months, and that the hot spot phase will cost about \$14 million.

Sludge to be dredged from the hot spots has more than 4,000 parts per million of PCBs.

About \$20 million has already been spent on research and study of New Bedford Harbor, which joined the national Superfund hazardous waste site list in 1982.

The EPA's choice of what to do with the 118 acres, most of which is in the Acushnet River estuary, calls for the dredged material to be stored in three "disposal facilities." Two of these would be in New Bedford, north of the Coggeshall Street Bridge, and the third in a small cove in Fairhaven directly across the river. The sludge is to be covered with an impermeable material, soil, and vegetation.

While this would significantly decrease the spread of contaminants, there would still be a threat from eating contaminated organisms harvested from this area. The fishing ban would remain in place.

Copies of the plan, which also outlines eight other alternatives the EPA looked at, are available at the New Bedford Public Library.

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The EPA will hold a public meeting Jan. 30 to discuss the plan for the 118 acres. That meeting marks the beginning of a 120-day comment period.

The agency is also sponsoring a meeting tonight, at 7:30 p.m. at Buttonwood Library, to discuss the incineration project, which has generated opposition in the community by those who say burning the sludge could be unsafe.

Site preparation and construction work are to begin next month. The

EPA expects the work to continue through the year, and plans to begin burning about sludge contaminated with PCB and heavy metal at the end of 1992 or beginning of 1993.

The EPA plans to hold monthly meetings during the project to address concerns and answer questions for the public.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are considered probable human carcinogens and have caused cancer in laboratory animals. The chemical was dumped into the harbor by electronic manufacturing firms from the 1930s until 1978 when it was banned.

The EPA is suing five companies for cleanup and natural resource restoration costs. Three have settled, but the cases are still winding their way through the court system.