

Kerry to seek Woods Pond action

By Lewis C. Cuyler
Berkshire Eagle Staff

LENOX — U.S. Sen. John F. Kerry, D-Mass., promised a group of Housatonic River advocates yesterday that he would attempt to have the PCB-contaminated Woods Pond area designated as a federal Superfund site, a move that would speed the cleanup.

Meeting with the group in midmorning prior to a canoe trip up the river, Kerry heard briefings from members of the Housatonic River Initiative about the status of the cleanup, then engaged in a dialogue about how his office might respond.

During the exchange, Douglas Luckerman, an attorney for the Environmental Protection Agency, said the EPA is operating under the constraints of the federal Resource and Conservation Recovery Act, which does not authorize sufficient funding or authority to do the job needed.

'You need strategy'

"It has made the work extremely difficult," he said. "The problem is that once a project is under RCRA, it stays in RCRA."

Kerry, who had listened intently for several minutes as advocates described the river's potential as an economic and scenic resource, agreed.

"You need a strategy," he said. "You need to push the envelope. Despite the fiscal constraints in Washington, you need to maximize the opportunities."

Five minutes later, as the discussion began to wind down, the senator said, "I guess the next thing to do is for me to sit down with John DeVillars and plot the way to go. It should be a Superfund site; it's crazy for it not to be."

John P. DeVillars is Region 1 administrator for the EPA.

Interviewed following the meeting, both Luckerman and Timothy Gray of Lee, the recently elected president of the river initiative, said they felt that the meeting with Kerry represented progress.

Luckerman said he had joined the cleanup project about six or seven months ago and had spent a lot of time "building bridges between the various agencies and



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Sen. John F. Kerry is in the bow of the lead canoe in a flotilla taking a look at Woods Pond in Lenox and the Housatonic River above the pond. In the stern is George L. Darey.

people involved."

These include GE, which is under a federal order to perform the cleanup, the state Department of Environmental Protection and the EPA.

For years the various parties were at loggerheads because of differing agendas.

Stonewalling alleged

Luckerman said he felt that phase of the cleanup history is over and a dialogue had begun.

Gray said that he was also encouraged by the meeting and that, after years of "stonewalling," GE has become more responsive.

The Woods Pond area, because of a dam, is regarded as one of the more severely PCB-contaminated stretches of water in the state and possibly the nation.

The acronym stands for poly-

chlorinated biphenyls, which GE used from 1929 to 1977 in the manufacture of transformers. The EPA banned the compound in 1979, naming it a possible carcinogen.

The debate about their danger continues. Studies have linked PCBs to skin cancer and, more recently, have suggested a possible link to breast cancer. However, a direct link to such diseases has never been proved.

They were carried in a mixture called Pyranol, which was distributed by pipeline from a central storage tank to various parts of the sprawling GE plant just off East Street. Years of leaks and spills and waste disposal practices that are now illegal led to pollution of buildings as well as grounds adjacent to the Housatonic River, then the river itself through a leaching process.

In the past dozen years, GE has spent more than \$50 million on the cleanup, according to an estimate last year by Ronald F. Desgroseilliers, GE's manager of environmental and facility programs. About 50 GE employees are at work on the cleanup project, studying the situation as they prepare a plan of action.

Because the Woods Pond cleanup to date has been characterized by studies instead of direct action, environmental groups have charged GE with dragging its feet, an allegation the company has denied by pointing to the extent of its research.

GE undertook an experiment there in bioremediation — the process of accelerating the natural destruction of the PCBs by microbes. In the process, the

'It should be a Superfund site; it's crazy for it not to be,' Kerry said. 'You need a strategy. You need to push the envelope' despite fiscal constraints.

PCBS, continued on B5

Kerry to seek Superfund status for Woods Pond

■ PCBS, from B1

company rebuilt the dam at a cost of \$2.6 million. Other proposals have involved dredging the PCB-laden sediment from the banks and river bottom.

Kerry sounded a conciliatory note at the beginning of the meeting.

"I am not here on a blame mission," he said. "The industrial revolution created a way of doing business in which people did not think about waste and pollution."

"In one way or another, we were all responsible," he said. "Now we are owning up to the cost of cleanup, and while nobody wants to bankrupt a business, we have to join in river cleanup."

Housatonic River Initiative

representatives all told Kerry more money is needed for their effort because it could not be accomplished completely by volunteers. Money is also needed to continue the research on PCBs and their link to various diseases, they said.

Hit the water

They emphasized the Housatonic as an economic resource for the county because of its potential for recreation in an economy where tourism is a growing sector. In addition, they said, the Housatonic and its banks are major sanctuaries for wildlife, birds and fish.

"I think it's time to go canoeing," said Kerry at the conclusion of the 45 minutes of discussion.

Minutes later a flotilla of seven canoes — one with Kerry and George L. Darey in the lead — and a kayak put in near the south end of Woods Pond and headed up river for two miles, skirting the base of October Mountain. Much of the adjoining acreage is owned by the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, said Darey, who is chairman of its board.

About 20 participated in the meeting that was held in the old Lenox railroad station, now the home of a museum maintained by the Berkshire Scenic Railway.

Their ranks included Thomas

H. Stokes, coordinator for the Housatonic River Initiative; George S. Wislocki, president of the Berkshire Natural Resources Council; Rene Laubach, director of Berkshire Sanctuaries for the Massachusetts Audubon Society; river advocates Benno Friedman, Michael Friedman and John Nalepa; Theodore Giddings, outdoor columnist for The Berkshire Eagle; J. Lyn Cutler of the DEP, and Mayor Edward M. Reilly of Pittsfield.

In introductory remarks, state Rep. Christopher J. Hodgkins, D-Lee, called the group "the best collection of environmentalists in the Berkshires."

Workshop on herbs

Column Notes