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Healthy outlook for fish revival in river

Once-dead Cuyahoga shows new signs of life in latest EPA samples

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Steve Tuckerman has seen the Cuyahoga River at its worst.

In 1984, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency staff member pulled only eight fish from the river north of Akron on one collection. And those deformed white suckers and gizzard shad together had only 12 eroded fins.

"It was pretty disgusting," he said.

That's why Tuckerman and his co-workers are so happy with preliminary results that show a major improvement in water quality in the Cuyahoga River, where no fish were found between Akron and Cleveland in the 1960s and 1970s.

For the first time, most of the 47 miles of the river from Lake Rockwell north of Kent through Akron to Harvard Avenue in Cleveland will probably meet the EPA's standards for fish and aquatic insects.

It is a major environmental milestone for a once-dead river that became a symbol of pollution when it caught fire in Cleveland in 1969. That fire led to passage of the federal Clean Water Act.

"What's happened is truly remarkable," said Elaine Marsh of the Akron-based Friends of the Crooked River. "I'm cheering and all the friends are cheering. . . . That's a wonderful statement about a lot of work by a lot of people, both public and private, over a long, long time. And our children will thank us for not giving up on the Cuyahoga River."

The number of fish species has increased to the point where the river gets full attainment of what is called a "warmwater habitat" designation. That's been the goal for decades.

The only section of the river not to meet the fish-insect standards — Ohio's criteria to assess water quality — is a 7.8-mile stretch from Boston Mills north of Peninsula to a dam at state Route 82 on the Summit-Cuyahoga County line.

And though the river now meets the standard under the federal Clean Water Act of being "fishable," it still cannot be considered "swimmable," the other federal goal, because of high bacteria levels.

The EPA decided to check for fish and insects in the river this year largely because of the results of fish sampling by the Cuyahoga Heights-based Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District. The district tested seven miles of the river and reported good results, including finding first-ever lake trout and flathead catfish.

The Ohio EPA uses a complicated formula based on the number of fish and insect species to gauge stream water quality. In general, the more species, the cleaner the

water.

Certain fish species and insects can survive only in clean water; these fish and insects are more desirable than species that live in polluted areas. Insect populations generally recover more quickly than fish populations.

Tuckerman said the number of fish species along the river ranges from 13 at Gorge Metro Park between Akron and Cuyahoga Falls to 25 at state Route 82 on the Brecksville-Sagamore Hills Township border.

All along the river, more than 40 fish species are found.

The warmwater habitat designation does not cover the 5.6-mile shipping channel through the Cleveland Flats. North of Lake Rockwell in Portage and Geauga counties, about half of the river is in full attainment of being a warmwater habitat; the rest is in partial attainment.

Surprising results

The fish-testing results were surprising to EPA staffers like Charles Boucher and Jack Freda because they represent a major reversal since 2000, when the agency last tested the river.

At that time, only 8 1/2 miles of the river between Lake Rockwell and Harvard Avenue — in Valley View in southern Cuyahoga County, in Akron's Cascade Valley and near Kent in Portage County — were in full attainment.

The EPA is still analyzing the 2008 samples and a final report won't be completed until next spring, said Boucher and Freda.

But Boucher said the river is in its best shape since the Civil War.

And its recovery seems almost a miracle.

"That's why we're giddy," the 55-year-old Tuckerman said. "If you had asked me 20 years ago, I would have said there's no way that we'd ever see what we're seeing. . . . In the 1970s and 1980s, I didn't think it would happen in my career. The habitat was there, but the pollution was so severe and so pervasive. The change is that dramatic."

Ohio began its biological monitoring in 1984, when Tuckerman got his first look at the polluted river.

The agency conducted comprehensive tests of water chemistry, fish tissues, sediments, fish-insects and bacteria in 1991 and 1996.

Freda said the EPA became worried when the 1996 tests indicated that the fish-insect recovery appeared to be leveling off. But the fish numbers rebounded strongly in 2000 tests, when 43 species were found, Tuckerman said.

That surprised the agency, which had expected slow, gradual progress, and the latest news was equally astonishing, he said.

Boucher said it's not clear why the number of fish and insect species increased so sharply — that issue needs further study.

The improvement in the Cuyahoga's water quality is the result of reduced industrial discharges and major sewer improvements in Akron and Cleveland, as well as additional work by many parties over the decades, EPA staff members said.

Akron has invested hundreds of millions of dollars over the years to improve its sewage treatment plant, which discharges to the river.

The city's combined sanitary and storm sewers remain a problem. Akron has put together a \$370 million plan to eliminate 38 sewers that empty untreated human waste into the Cuyahoga River, the Little Cuyahoga River and the Ohio & Erie Canal after heavy rains.

Positive effect

Boucher said it appears that Rack 40, Akron's \$17.8 million tank off Cuyahoga Street that stores up to 9 1/2 million gallons of sewage overflow, has had a positive effect on the river.

The news about the river now meeting the goal of being "fishable" was not surprising to Ray Flasco, a 57-year-old angler from Akron.

Last weekend, he caught a 26-inch rainbow trout and four smallmouth bass (10 to 12 inches in length) on the Cuyahoga River in North Akron.

He has caught 10 species of fish in the Cuyahoga, including northern pike, and his largest catch was a 30-inch steelhead. He described the fish as generally healthy-looking with no lesions or sores.

"The Cuyahoga is a maligned river," Flasco said. "But it's the rebound river, a healthy stream, and it's one of the best fishing rivers around. Fishermen have known for a few years that the fish are back in the Cuyahoga."

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