

THE PLAIN DEALER

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CLEANING UP THE CUYAHOGA

FROM 'BURN ON' TO MOVING ON

40 years after the flames from the infamous fire died, the Cuyahoga River is making a quiet comeback

MICHAEL SCOTT
Plain Dealer Reporter

Fire and water.

That's the short version of our 40-year ride down the Cuyahoga River following the infamous fire of June 1969.

And almost everyone knows this tarnished local tale that went national: molten sparks from a passing rail car set fire to oil- and chemical-soaked debris floating on the Cuyahoga on June 22, 1969. The brief blaze torched a railroad bridge near Republic Steel — but branded Cleveland as a dirty city where water burns.

Time magazine said that summer that our river "oozes rather than flows." Johnny Carson and plenty of others joked about it. Randy Newman most famously wrote about it in a song.

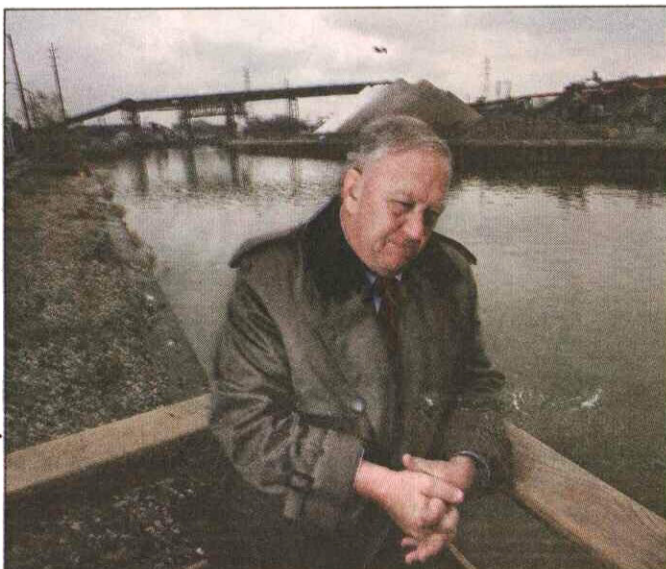
Burn on, big river, indeed.

"You would think that people would forget about it after all this time — but no," said Jim White, executive director of the Cuyahoga River Community Planning Organization as he stood near the site of the fire. "I had a visitor here from Russia recently and the first thing he wanted to see was where the river burned."

But the full story, like the Cuyahoga River itself, follows a more crooked and complex path.

And it's that more comprehensive story which White's river group and others will be telling in 2009 — The Year of the River — culminating in a week of events in June to remember the fire and celebrate the subsequent recovery of the Cuyahoga.

SEE CUYAHOGA | A12

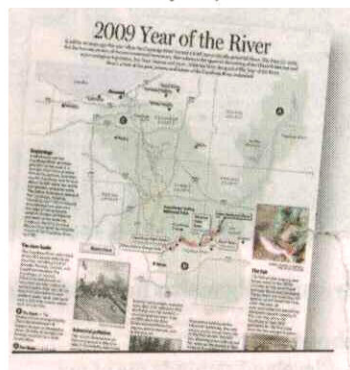


THOMAS ONDREY | THE PLAIN DEALER

Jim White, head of Cuyahoga River Community Planning Organization, a group dedicated to cleaning up the river, stands downstream from the site of the Cuyahoga River fire in 1969. The low-level bridge in the distance is the approximate location of the fire. Much has changed in the 40 years since the fire.

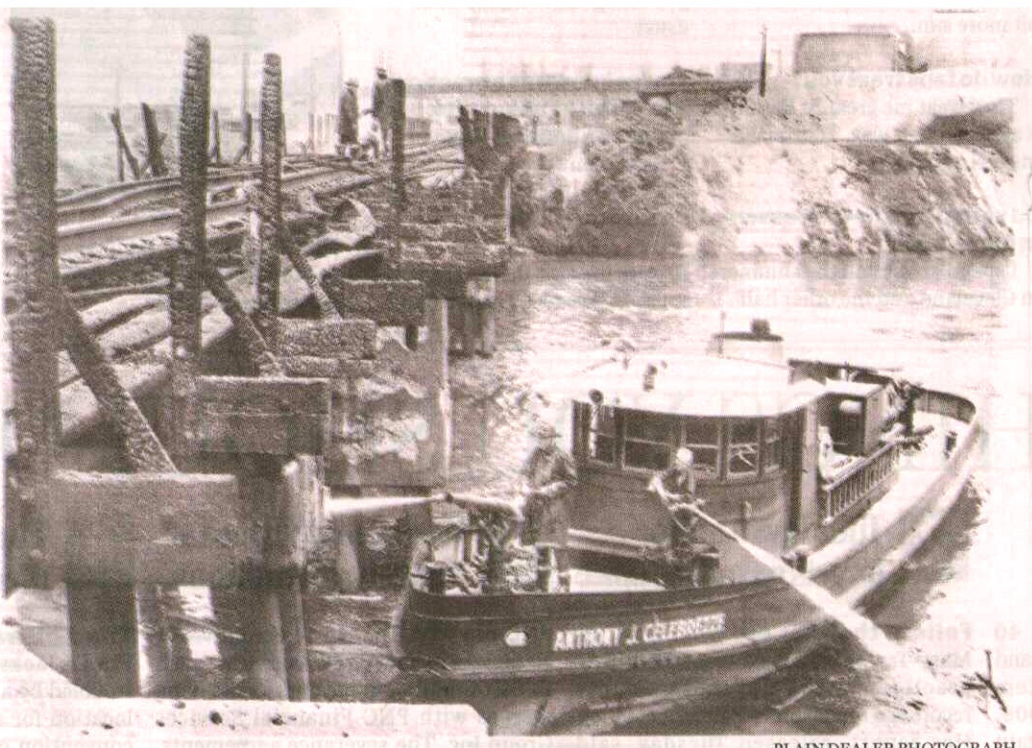
Inside: Year of the River

A look at the past, present and future of the Cuyahoga River watershed. **Graphic, A12**



Online: 40 years ago

Read the story and see historical photos of the 1969 Cuyahoga River fire. Watch video and post your comments.



PLAIN DEALER PHOTOGRAPH

Cleveland firefighters aboard the Anthony J. Celebrezze fire boat extinguish hot spots on a railroad bridge torched by burning fluids and debris on the Cuyahoga River in 1969. The fire hurt the city's reputation tremendously and is still the subject of jokes.

From 'burn on' to moving on

History now reveals the notorious fire as a messy midstream shift, a turning point in the story of the Cuyahoga. Because of the fire, legislators who had been talking about protecting the environment finally did something about it — and industrialists who had been polluting the river since the Industrial Revolution had to change their ways.

"The fire was a bad thing, sure, but some good came out of it in the end," said Jane Goodman, a South Euclid councilwoman and spokeswoman for the river planning group. "Many people see this fire as being a catalyst for the federal Clean Water Act and other environmental laws."

"And those laws went a long way toward bringing the river back."

Life coming back

Just ask the fish. Or the scientists who count them.

When Ohio Environmental Protection Agency biologists in the mid-1980s first began counting fish in the middle to lower section of the Cuyahoga River — the worst polluted section of the stream as it wound through Akron to Cleveland — they would literally come back with fewer than 10 fish.

Not 10 fish *species*, but 10 *fish* — and most of those were species like gizzard shad, which can survive in polluted water, but end up deformed or mutated. Results in subsequent years were continually better, but mostly in the upper reaches of the stream in rural Geauga and Portage counties.

But when the EPA crews went back last summer — after hearing unexpectedly high unofficial counts from Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District officials who also tally aquatic life in the river — they found 40 different fish species in the river in the crucial and most polluted area between Akron and Cleveland, including steelhead trout, northern pike and other clean-water fish. The entire river had more than 60 species of fish.

"It's been an absolutely amazing recovery," said Steve Tuckerman of the Ohio EPA's Twinsburg office, who made those first reports in 1984. "I wouldn't have believed that this section of the river would have this dramatic of a turnaround in my career, but it has."

The result of those fish samples could be that the important middle section of the river — from just north of Kent in Portage County through Akron to Harvard Avenue in Cleveland — will now meet U.S. EPA standards for aquatic life habitat — that's both fish and insects — under the federal Clean Water Act.

It could happen sometime this year, perhaps in time for the 40th anniversary on June 22.

"That's our goal and we think it's going to happen," White said. "The numbers are there to show that the fish have returned."

"Because fish just go where there's clean water — they don't remember how bad it was."

For more information, contact Public Information Specialist Jean Chapman at ext. 6853.

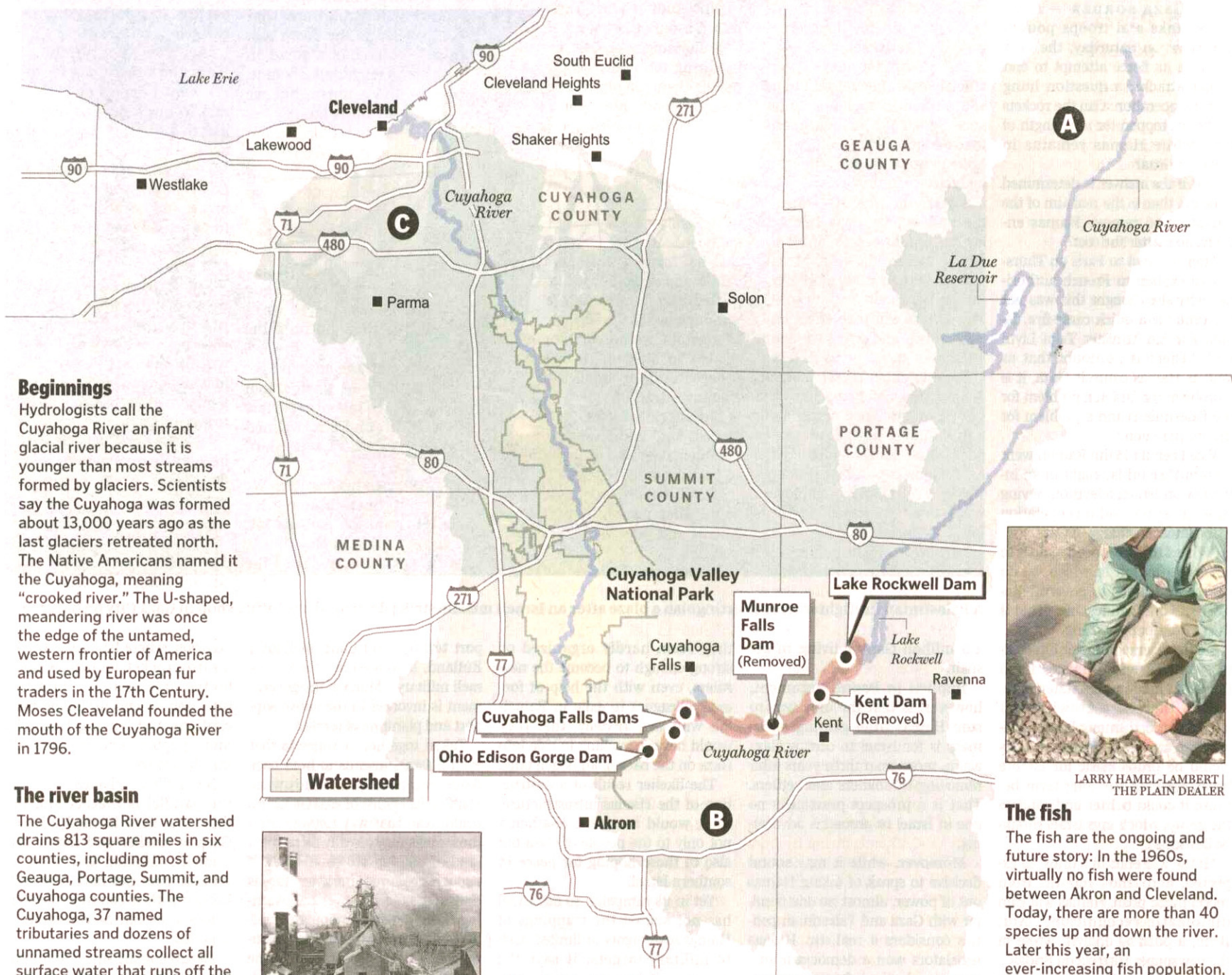


**Northeast Ohio Regional
Sewer District**

Protecting Your Health and Environment

2009 Year of the River

It will be 40 years ago this year when the Cuyahoga River burned a brief, but politically powerful, blaze. The June 22, 1969, fire has become an icon of the environmental movement. Our infamous fire spurred the writing of the Clean Water Act and other ecological legislation. For those reasons and more, 2009 has been designated The Year of the River. Here's a look at the past, present and future of the Cuyahoga River watershed



Beginnings

Hydrologists call the Cuyahoga River an infant glacial river because it is younger than most streams formed by glaciers. Scientists say the Cuyahoga was formed about 13,000 years ago as the last glaciers retreated north. The Native Americans named it the Cuyahoga, meaning "crooked river." The U-shaped, meandering river was once the edge of the untamed, western frontier of America and used by European fur traders in the 17th Century. Moses Cleaveland founded the mouth of the Cuyahoga River in 1796.

The river basin

The Cuyahoga River watershed drains 813 square miles in six counties, including most of Geauga, Portage, Summit, and Cuyahoga counties. The Cuyahoga, 37 named tributaries and dozens of unnamed streams collect all surface water that runs off the land from precipitation and sends it south, west, and north over a 100-mile course, which ends at Lake Erie.

A The Upper — The headwaters in Geauga County. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources designates about 25 miles in Geauga and Portage counties as a State Scenic River.

B The Middle — A 22-mile stretch from Akron to Cleveland, which includes the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, but also most of the dams that impair fish movement upstream.

C The Lower — Still the most polluted section and dominated by industry and urban development. Officials are trying out underwater habitat baskets along the steel bulkheads lining the banks to make the river more friendly to aquatic plant and animal life.

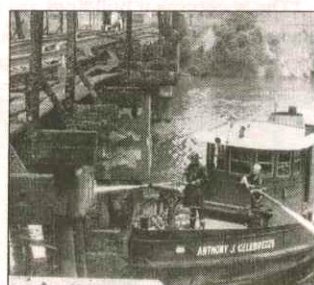


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Industrial pollution

The rise of Cleveland as an industrial power is linked to John D. Rockefeller and others who brought oil refineries and then steel mills and other processing plants to the riverbanks. Their byproducts, along with gasoline, oil, paint, and metals from other industries choked and nearly killed the plants, animals and aquatic bugs that lived in the once-flourishing river. One of the reasons the Cuyahoga is cleaner today is that there is now not only less pollution coming from industrial sites, but also because of a changing economy, and fewer companies to do the polluting. Today, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer

District, for example, monitors more than 900 industries that discharge into the system — several hundred fewer than in 1985 when the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency turned that job over to the district.



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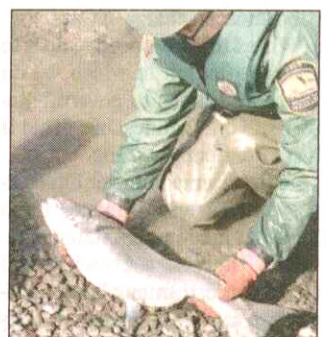
The fire

The river — more accurately, the oil-slick soaked wood paper and other debris — caught fire around noon on Sunday, June 22, 1969. The blaze was put out in half an hour and caused about \$50,000 in damage — brief and cheap compared to several other of the 10 previous

fires over a century on the industrial waterway. The only known photo, shown here, ran in The Plain Dealer the next day, showing crews putting out hot spots on the burned bridge timbers. It was front-page news, though, because it was the first fire since 1952.

The cleanup

Technically, it began before the fire. Earlier in 1969, Cleveland officials had set aside \$100 million for Cuyahoga River cleanup. But vast amounts of federal money soon followed after the Clean Water Act was enacted in 1972, along with other environmental laws. Wastewater treatment plants were upgraded in Cleveland and Akron. Environmental officials cracked down on the industries, which had been pouring toxic sludge into their treatment plants, or directly into the river.



LARRY HAMEL-LAMBERT | THE PLAIN DEALER

The fish

The fish are the ongoing and future story: In the 1960s, virtually no fish were found between Akron and Cleveland. Today, there are more than 40 species up and down the river. Later this year, an ever-increasing fish population, along with aquatic insects, in the river may allow the Cuyahoga to meet EPA guidelines for the first time since the law was put in place.



CHUCK CROW | THE PLAIN DEALER

The dams

Dams in the river keep the fish from moving upstream to spawn — a critical impairment to the health of the Cuyahoga. There are only four dams remaining, however, after key structures in Kent and Munroe Falls were recently removed. The Ohio EPA would still like to take out two dams in Cuyahoga Falls as well as the larger Edison Gorge dam.

MICHAEL SCOTT, JAMES OWENS | THE PLAIN DEALER

SOURCES: Ohio Department of Natural Resources; U.S. and Ohio Environmental Protection Agency; Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District; Cleveland State University; Plain Dealer files

For more information, contact Public Information Specialist Jean Chapman at ext. 6853.

low forms such as leeches and sludge worms that usually thrive on wastes."

Ecological costs of boom

But people do.

We now look back on the boom years of the Cleveland economy with a mixture of economic longing and ecological remorse. We may still want the jobs that came with oil, plastics, paint and steel — but not the sludge byproducts that came with it.

In fact, because of that flammable mix, even fire was hardly a novelty on the Cuyahoga — or any of the great industrial waterways of America over a period of about a hundred years of progress.

The Cuyahoga had burned as early as 1868 and a half-dozen times more before a 1952 fire caused more than \$1.5 million in damage.

The last fire, however, started around noon on that June Sunday, and was put out in a half-hour after causing only about \$50,000 in damage — brief and cheap compared to some previous fires on the industrial waterway.

The photo that ran in *The Plain Dealer* on June 23, 1969, showed crews hosing down the smoldering timbers of the railroad bridge, but no spectacular flames or smoke.

The *Time* magazine story also said this: "Some River! Chocolate-brown, oily, bubbling with subsurface gases, it oozes rather than flows."

The Federal Water Pollution Control Administration was less dramatic in a report several years after the fire, but no less emphatic: "The lower Cuyahoga has no visible signs of life, not even

Cleanup begins

But the fire, hardly the worst on a then-highly flammable strip of water coursing through Cleveland, is also credited for spurring lawmakers to draw up more stringent clean-water and other environmental regulations.

Within three years of the Cuyahoga River fire, Congress had passed several new environmental laws, most importantly the Clean Water Act.

The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District — which took over sewer operations for Cleveland in 1972, right on the heels of the fire and clean-water laws — also played a vital and multibillion-dollar role in the cleanup of the Cuyahoga.

The law forced Akron and Cleveland to improve their sewage treatment plants, add sewer lines and will soon include the treatment of storm water.

The Clean Water Act also put the EPA, and eventually the sewer district, in charge of monitoring how much pollution heavy manufacturers were putting into the river — and levying fines up to \$25,000 a day if they violated the new law.

The sewer district has civil authority over the industries and individuals that dispose into its system — and ultimately the river — but criminal investigations are left up to the state and federal EPA after the case is referred by the sewer district.

"We put a few people out of business in the early days — we had to," said Scott Linn of the sewer district. "There were some pretty bad players back then, but

The last 40 years

1969: Debris and oil floating on the Cuyahoga River catches fire, the last of a dozen fires over 100 years of industrial development.

1970: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency created; Kent Environmental Council created, with emphasis on Cuyahoga River.

1972: Adoption of federal Clean Water Act, which aims for U.S. waterways to be cleaned up to become "fishable and swimmable." At this time, biologists can find no fish in the river between Akron and Cleveland.

1974: Creation of Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, now known as a National Park, which preserves natural areas along the river.

1988: The 45 river miles between Akron and Cleveland named one of 43 most polluted waterways on the Great Lakes.

1991: An Ohio EPA report shows improving fish populations and water quality in tributaries to Cuyahoga.

1994: Great blue heron and bald eagles, both fish-eating birds, start returning to the Cuyahoga. Still, the Ohio Department of Health issues warnings for people to limit consumption of certain fish species caught in the river.

now it's more about keeping people in business, but making sure they are in compliance."

Linn showed off charts for



1997: Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District begins work on Mill Creek tunnel, a massive 5.4-mile pipe that will hold sewage and rainwater for treatment before it enters the Cuyahoga's largest tributary.

1998: White House names Cuyahoga as one of 14 American Heritage Rivers, which means that the river receives priority status in federal funding and in other government services.

2000: An Ohio EPA report shows 62 species of fish along the full length of the river and six of eight areas between Akron and Cleveland meet some or all of the goals set by the federal Clean Water Act.

toxic metals like cadmium, chromium and lead that were once at nearly 200 parts per million and are now almost entirely gone

2002: Akron announces a \$377 million plan to correct its combined sewers, which dump sewage and rainwater into the Cuyahoga and its tributaries during heavy rains.

2003: U.S. EPA approves state report that outlines ways to improve the river.

2004: The Cuyahoga River Remedial Action Plan discusses ways to have the river removed from an international list of most-polluted sites on the Great Lakes; the Cuyahoga is rerouted around the Kent dam to give fish a better chance to move upstream.

2005: The Munroe Falls dam is removed.

2007: The Cuyahoga River Community Planning Organization develops a prototype underwater habitat basket to place along steel bulkheads in Cleveland to give aquatic plants and animals a chance to thrive in the still lifeless channel.

2008: Studies by the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District are sent to the EPA showing that much of the middle section of the Cuyahoga should meet the "fishable" standard set by the Clean Water Act.

2009: Year of the River declared by Cuyahoga River Community Planning Organization

from the river. The absence of those poisons has led to the return of aquatic plant life, bugs and finally fish.

But the fire also galvanized environmental groups like the Kent Environmental Council, which held its first meeting soon after and its first river cleanup in 1970.

The formation of dozens of groups followed year by year, including Friends of The Crooked River in the 1990s, a group that has sponsored a cleanup along the length of the Cuyahoga.

In 1988, the Cuyahoga River Remedial Action Plan was also put in place, the precursor to the planning organization now headed by White. The group is heading the planning for this summer's commemorative events.

The group — joined by parks, communities and other organizations — is still putting together specific plans for the month of June, when national and even international media are likely to look in on the health of the Cuyahoga after the iconic fire.

But you can bet they won't dodge the past.

"Well, we can't undo it — so why not overdo it?" Goodman said when asked about the group's plans. "We can't go back in time and make it not happen, so let's use it to show how far we've come."

In fact, there may even be a way to "set the river on fire again," Goodman said.

"Well, we'd love to use lights or fireworks or even floating something on fire on the river," she said. "The beauty of that is that the river won't catch fire on its own anymore."

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Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District

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