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GREEN BAY PRESS-GAZETTE

MONDAY, JULY 13, 2020 | GREENBAYPRESSGAZETTE.COM PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



Tetra Tech employees remove turbidity monitors from the Fox River in downtown Green Bay as a 12-year, \$1.3 billion cleanup of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, from the Lower Fox River nears completion.

PHOTOS BY KARL BERTY/USA TODAY NETWORK WISCONSIN

Tribes lag behind rest of state in census response

Sarah Volpenhein
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

It's a question some Alloway comes across a lot in her work with the 2020 census.

What good will giving the U.S. government my information do for me and my family?

By the time she's done talking, she said, the person is usually excited about filling out the census.

"I really try to make it relatable," said Alloway, the Forest County Potawatomi tribal liaison for the U.S. Census.

When talking recently with a Potawatomi mother, who was expecting another child, she tied the census to what it could mean for health care for the woman's children.

"I was able to let her know that this data is what hospitals look for, what they will be basing strategic plans and budgets on to know how many OBs to bring into the area," Alloway said.

Wisconsin has the nation's second-highest response rate to the census behind Minnesota, with nearly seven in 10 households having submitted responses. But in most tribal areas in the state, response rates are lagging far behind, with as few as two in every 10 households responding, more than three months since the constitutionally required, decennial count began.

U.S. Census officials point to disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic as part of what's driving the low response rates. Some census operators were put on hold as governments across the country put stay-at-home orders in place.

Risk of undercount

Native American people have long been at risk of being missed in the census.

Nationwide, an estimated 1.7 million Native Americans living on reservations were missed by census takers in 2000, according to an audit of the 2000 census. Some of the missing people may have been accounted for in the final count, through a statistical process that assigns characteristics, such as age, sex and race, to people who did not respond to the census but whom census takers know or suspect exist.

According to the 2000 count, there are more than 86,000 people who identify as Native American in Wisconsin. Of those, more than 17,000 live on reservations or trust land of one of the state's 11 federally recognized tribes.

Any undercount can have very real consequences for tribal communities.

The census is used to distribute political power. It is used to determine how many seats in the U.S. House each state gets and to draw boundaries for local, state and federal political

See CENSUS, Page 7A

Challenges remain

\$1.3B removal of 3.5M tons of toxic sediment from Fox River wrapping up – was it worth it?

Paul Strubas Green Bay Press-Gazette
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Twelve years and \$1.3 billion ago, the first scoop of PCB-laden sediment was hauled from the bottom of the Lower Fox River as court-ordered cleanup began.

But with the final scoop of the cleanup project just weeks away, you still don't want to make a steady diet of any of the fish caught in the river. You still don't want your dog lapping up any of the water.

So the question is, was it worth it?

"I don't think we can put it in terms of 'worth,'" said Bud Harris, a retired ecology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. Harris has made the Fox River and the bay of Green Bay his life's work, and his name appears prominently on nearly every important piece of study literature on water quality in area waters.



The Georgia-Pacific Broadway mill was one of several paper mills that released PCBs into the Lower Fox River, pictured here, in wastewater from recycling carbonless copy paper in the 1960s and 1970s.

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Victims of fraud only sometimes get restitution

Paul Strubas Green Bay Press-Gazette
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

GREEN BAY — Family members say George Sager was never the same after Lisa Lewis' sentencing.

Straight and tall and sharp as a tack at age 90, he attended that sentencing in Green Bay federal court June 2004 and listened attentively and angrily as Lewis was wept and apologized one by one to the elderly relatives she had cheated out of their life savings.

"Nancy? George? You've been a part of my life a very long time," she told Sager and his wife in court that day. "I love you both."

George was unimpressed. "She even took our Social Security checks," he told the Press-Gazette that day. "We're now in financial ruin. We have had credit and we've had to seek financial assistance."

It was too much for him, family members say. He went from being a self-sufficient military veteran, proud of the 35 missions he had flown over Japan during World War II, proud of his distinguished service medals for more than 30 years of military service, a proud member of America's "Greatest Generation," to being a guy who couldn't support himself and his wife, a man who needed government assistance, a man reduced to talking his creditors and bankers.

"He was really in good shape, but when that all happened, he really went downhill fast," said his stepson, Michael Lesage, of Abrams. "The geriatrician, it was a sad deal. It was just too much trauma for him, at his age, just too much."

"I think he felt he really let Nancy down, that he should have been aware," said his daughter-in-law, Kelly Lesage. Lewis had posed as an investment broker, persuaded several elderly

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USA TODAY

Virus affects many: Third of Americans know someone with virus, survey says. **A4**

A lot on their minds

Brewers have many considerations, on and off field. **Sports, 1B**

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Cleanup

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"What is the environment worth?" he asked. "PCB elimination reflected a truly toxic problem. From all the evidence we have of it, we realized some of the problem. We were poisoning birds, for Christ's sake — I think it was absolutely necessary, the responsible thing to do."

Pollution in the river and bay has been a public concern since at least 1900, but that was mostly because communities had been dumping raw sewage into the water for most of the previous century. The problem ultimately led to the development of the Green Bay Metropolitan Sewerage District, now NEW Water, which cleans the water before returning it to its source.

But it wasn't until the 1960s that scientists really began thinking about a problem with Foster's terms, finding dioxin and PCBs in the river.

Polychlorinated biphenyls is an organic chlorine compound with a variety of industrial uses. It was first synthesized in the late 1800s but didn't come into major industrial production and use until decades later. Scientists already in the 1930s knew PCBs were toxic, but use of the compound expanded in following decades.

In the 1950s, NCR Corp. found a way to use it to produce carbonless copy paper — copy paper that didn't ink all over your hands, but that turned out to produce a whole different stain that was a lot harder to eradicate.

PCBs don't break down or degrade easily. They end up in the water and in the plants and animals that feed on them, moving up the food chain, growing in concentration at every step. They are believed to cause a variety of problems in animals, ranging from disruption of reproductive systems to cancer.

As paper companies throughout the Fox River Valley began to shift their operations more and more toward recycling paper pulp in the 1960s and '70s, they unwittingly helped distribute that chemical throughout the water system, even after NCR acknowledged the problem and stopped producing the copy paper in 1971.

Cure started with Foster's term

Scientists like Harris didn't really start focusing on PCBs as a problem until the 1960s. It was the early in that decade that the bells and whistles sounded, all because of the Foster's term.

The gull-like rookbird is a seasonal visitor to the entire Midwest, but has found the Fox River Valley and shoreline of Green Bay to be a hospitable breeding ground.

But as a fish-eater, the rookbird's term comes in high on the food chain, meaning it was prone to accumulating high concentrations of PCBs.

"In 1963... some of my students, one in particular, was making observations on birds and picked up on a problem with Foster's terms, finding dioxin and PCBs in the river."

PCB levels found in tern eggs from Green Bay were found to be nearly 10 times higher than eggs found in Lake Poygan, which is upstream from where the PCB-tainted discharges had occurred.

Hatchlings success of Green Bay's tern eggs was 75 percent lower than those from Lake Poygan. Hatchlings were 20 percent lighter. Testing also revealed what testers called "aberrant parental behavior" — basically mother birds were ignoring their nests. That appeared to account for the lower survival rate in the hatchlings.

Birds were also spotted in the water and on the banks, common terns, and double-crested cormorants.

Oddy, when the terns underwent testing again in 1968, there was an improvement. PCB concentrations were 67 percent of what they had been in 1963. Harris and his fellow scientists deduced that low water levels and reduced flow in the river cut down on the water's scouring effect on the river bottom, so the PCBs were staying down there instead of climbing up the food chain as readily.

Unfortunately, as is often the case in scientific inquiry, 1968 turned out to be the last serious examination of PCB's impact on Foster's terns.

But numerous other studies had been ongoing, each leading to additional studies looking at issues involving everything from PCBs to phosphorus and suspended solids in the river and the bay.

By this time, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had identified Green Bay as a problem site for PCBs, cadmium and lead, and a mass balance study was launched. Led by Harris and dozens of investigators from multiple universities and agencies, the \$1 million study — roughly \$22.6 million in today's dollars — concluded that PCBs needed to be removed from the bay and river.

Court battles were waged

In the 1990s that work moved from the laboratories and on-site sampling stations and into the courtroom. The EPA and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources had identified "potentially responsible parties" — basically the paper companies that



Breenan Marine employees work from a dredging barge in 2016 to remove polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, from the Fox River just south of the Bay Nichee Memorial Bridge in downtown Green Bay.

distributed PCBs throughout the lower Fox River system through the years — and the government agencies sued for a court-ordered cleanup.

Part of the court battle was between the two government agencies and the potentially responsible parties, but there were also skirmishes among the potentially responsible parties. For example, NCR and Appleton Paper, later known as Appleton, fought over whether Appleton Paper had acquired NCR's liability for environmental wrong-doing when it bought NCR's local operation in the 1970s — after PCB usage had ceased for the copy paper product.

These two companies also had a legal battle against the other potentially responsible parties, who tried to claim they were victims, and that it was NCR that knowingly dumped toxic waste into the water system and on the recyclers who processed NCR's scrap paper.

While U.S. Eastern District Judge William Griesbach worked to resolve those issues, Brown County Circuit Court Judge Donald Zandmiller worked to try to resolve fights between paper companies and their insurance companies, and many if not most of the paper companies had multiple insurance carriers in the years in which they were still recycling NCR's cast-off, PCB-laden paper scrap.

In as much as legal battles weren't accomplishing a river cleanup, the city of Green Bay certainly enjoyed an economic boost as teams of lawyers and insurance and paper company representatives and expert witnesses poured into town for every hearing, injecting money into area hotels and restaurants along the way.

At St. Brendan's Inn & Pub, one team of lawyers habitually would take over an entire floor of hotel rooms for weeks at a time, and they and their engineer and science witnesses would hang out at the bar all evening.

Results of the main part of the court battles came out as follows: NCR and Appleton, which already had spent nearly \$700 million for cleanup and in natural resource restoration penalties, agreed to take sole responsibility for the last \$200 million worth of cleanup costs over the project's final few years.

The two companies waived all claims for cost recovery from the other companies, specifically from Georgia-Pacific and FM Glasfiter, which, in addition to previously having shared some remediation and natural resource damage costs, agreed to bear primary responsibility for long-term monitoring and maintenance of the cleanup at an expected cost of about \$40 million.

Dredging, capping

Meanwhile, under pressure from the government, NCR and Appleton Paper began paying for cleanup operations in the 1970s — after PCB usage had ceased for the copy paper product.

They hired Tetra Tech Inc., a California-based remediation, engineering, remediation, restoration and construction firm, to serve as the subsidiaries of the Netherlands-based Royal IJssel Watermanagement to design, build and operate a state-of-the-art sediment dewatering system on the western bank of the Fox River.

Tetra Tech also hired J.T. Brennan Co. Inc. of La Crosse to do the actual dredging of the river bottom as well as the capping, or covering, of areas of river bottom where dredging was deemed too expensive.

Essentially, the strategy was to systematically dredge up contaminated sediment, dry it at the dewatering plant, treat the water and return it to the river. The contaminated sediment would be taken to a specially designated landfill site in northern Brown County.

By 2009, the Little Lake Cleanup Team had already performed six years of cleanup effects of Little Lake butte des Morts in the Neneah-Menasha area. A \$80 million project, it removed 370,000 cubic yards of PCB-contaminated sediment from the lake and covered 260 acres of lake bottom with sand.

The Lower Fox River portion of the project, involving the 39 miles of river from Little Lake butte des Morts to Green Bay, officially started with dredging and processing river sediment on April 28, 2009. The project called for dividing the portion of the river into six operating units and, starting on the southern end, working northward section by section.

As the project grinds to a halt this summer, workers will have dredged around 4.5 million cubic yards of sediment from the river and bay.

Nearly 3.5 million tons of sediment will have been processed and slightly more than that will have been hauled to the landfill in more than 142,000 trucksloads. Nearly 10 million gallons of water were treated and discharged back into the river.

Workers also capped about 880 acres of river bottom, sealing it with rocks and sand to lock PCBs in place in areas where dredging was not a practical approach.

To see if cleaning the river is claiming the PCBs are gone, but the Fox River system "is much cleaner with respect to toxic PCBs" than it was before the cleanup, said Beth Olson, a water quality expert with the DNR.

For example, the average surface concentration of PCBs has been reduced by about 90% from the upper stretches of river, roughly Appleton to De Pere and will be evaluated later this year for the remaining six-mile-long stretch of the river.

De Pere to the bay after all cleanup work is done, said PCB concentrations in surface water and sediment are also significantly reduced. River sediments were cleaned up by a combination of dredging, capping and sand covering.

Improvements have been more marked in the water than in the fish, which is to be expected, said Harris.

For example, in the stretch of river from Little Rapids to De Pere, PCB concentrations dropped 83 percent from 2006 to 2016, according to a report Harris put together in 2018. Walleye muscle showed no significant reduction in PCBs, but there was a 47 percent decline in carp tissue and an 81 percent reduction in gizzard and tissue.

Fish consumption advisories remain

Fish consumption advisories remain in place, but they've been revised to reflect diminished amounts of toxins in the food chain, and they'll be relaxed more and more as the cleanup progresses.

"A key goal of the PCB Cleanup Project is to protect recreational anglers and 30 years for recreational anglers and 30 years for high intake consumers when the project started."

As it turns out, while pregnant women and children need more caution, advisories have already relaxed to allow more frequent consumption of some species and even occasional consumption of fatty fish that used to be entirely forbidden, like white bass and carp, as long as they're not too large, and are properly cleaned and cooked.

"The time period until a fish species can be consumed without limitation depends on the species, fish size, and location on the river where the fish is caught," Olson said. "For example, fish samples in Little Lake Butte des Morts are showing good results, and some species may be clean enough for unlimited consumption within the next few years. We'll know more after the 2022 sampling event."

The EPA publicly cheers the impending completion of the overall cleanup project, identifying it as the largest involving a government-private business partnership in history.

After this summer, when we're able to officially decommission the site from the National Priority List and can celebrate this accomplishment, we'll see summers when folks are not looking at the barges working, and they'll see fishing, and they'll see the bay again," said Tim Fischer, remedial project manager of the U.S. EPA Region 5 (Great Lakes Division) in Chicago. "We'll plan a celebration with our state partners."

For Harris, such a celebration may be a sorely missed, if not outright premature.

"We can say on the whole it's been a success," he said of the PCB cleanup. "It's very hard to try to restore an ecosystem once it's been damaged to that extent, and we will never restore it to what it was."

At \$1.3 billion and 12 years in the making, the cleanup was no easy task, but it was a simple matter compared to the challenges still facing the river and bay, Harris said.

"Comprehensively, as an ecologist, when I look at the impact of land use change, farm runoff, construction, soil erosion, contaminated water, the runoff — all of that is a much bigger problem, with more ramifications, than PCBs were," Harris said.

Harris, who lives along the river, walks a stretch of it every day with his dog, and on a particular hot July day, he couldn't help noticing the blue-green algae blooms, a sure sign of the river's continual poisoning by farm and field runoff.

"We've got a bloom going on like crazy, because we've had lots of rain and gizzard had tissue."

"There is a link to toxicity and being able to swim there or not, or not letting your dog drink the water."

As complex as the PCB issue was, it was a problem coming out of a pipe he felt entirely in some cases.

"We've started addressing the problems one at a time, but it's a system, and we've got to think of it in systemic terms," he said. "But we don't, we address one thing at a time. That's why we have climate change."

"But that's another story."

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