

Port study finds health risks near Sparrows Point

Toxic chemicals in water, sediment a lifetime exposure threat

By Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun

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A new environmental study has found people and wildlife face higher-than-normal health risks from long-term exposure to toxic contaminants in the Patapsco River near Sparrows Point, the legacy of pollution from more than a century of steel-making on the outskirts of Baltimore's harbor.

The risk assessment commissioned by the Maryland Port Administration determined that people who swam their whole lifetime in the waters off the Coke Point area of Sparrows Point would be two to five times more likely to develop cancers or other health problems as people who did the same elsewhere in the harbor.

The study, released Monday by consultant EA Engineering, Science and Technology, found eating fish and crabs caught around Coke Point also carries health risks, but no worse than those for anywhere else in the harbor. The state already warns against eating large numbers of certain fish caught in the harbor, and against consuming the "mustard" in crabs, because of toxic contaminants in their bodies.

Wildlife such as osprey and raccoons that might feed on fish, crabs and other aquatic animals in the area also face risks from the contaminants, as do clams, worms and other bottom-dwelling organisms, the study found. Elevated levels of toxic chemicals and metals were detected in the water and sediments near shore, among them cancer-causing hydrocarbon compounds as well as polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, once a widely used insulating fluid.

The port ordered the \$500,000 study around Coke Point because the state is eyeing that portion of the 2,300-acre Sparrows Point peninsula as a possible repository for muck dredged from shipping channels in the harbor. But the costs of dealing with the contaminants there have not been determined, and no decision has been made on whether to proceed, said M. Kathleen Broadwater, deputy executive director of the port administration.

State environmental officials stressed that the health risks identified by the study were long-term and mostly hypothetical, because Coke Point isn't publicly accessible from land and not a popular fishing spot.

"People who do not fish, crab, or swim regularly in the waters immediately offshore of Coke Point, the most contaminated area of the Sparrows Point steelmaking property, have no reason to be concerned for their health by the findings of this risk assessment," Jay Apperson, spokesman for the Maryland Department of the Environment, said in an email.

But Kim Coble, Maryland director of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, called the findings "disturbing" and said they were in line with contamination found in past sampling. She said authorities need to proceed promptly with a similar study of potential risks in the more widely used waters of Bear Creek, a Patapsco tributary in the Dundalk area that borders another portion of Sparrows Point.

"Bear Creek isn't that far away," she said. The bay foundation, the Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper and several Dundalk area residents sued Severstal and other prior owners of Sparrows Point last year, accusing them of polluting nearby waterways and endangering the health of people living nearby.

Other government-ordered studies reported last year a vast plume of benzene and naphthalene in the ground water beneath the Coke Point area of Sparrows Point, where the steel plant's coke ovens once operated. The studies also found that the contaminants are seeping out into surrounding waters. Benzene is a carcinogenic component of petroleum, and naphthalene a byproduct of coal tar that can cause anemia and other health problems.

The steel mill recently changed hands, as Severstal North America sold it in March to RG Steel. Severstal began "interim" cleanup last year of six contaminated hot spots on the peninsula, pumping and treating the tainted ground water. A spokeswoman for RG Steel said company officials are still reviewing the risk study and have no comment.

Apperson said studies of other offshore contamination have been held up by a legal dispute with the steel mill's prior owners over whether they're responsible for paying for them.

A decision on that issue is pending. But Coble said the potential risks to Bear Creek residents are such that state and federal governments should go ahead on their own now with a risk assessment and sort out later who pays for it.

Apperson said state officials will consider doing just that if they don't get a ruling soon from the U.S. District Court in Baltimore.

Del. John Olszewski Jr., who represents the area, said he was pleasantly surprised by the study's findings. "I don't think it was as bad as some people had feared," he said, "which is good. But I still think there's enough there to demand attention — and swift attention — to have it remediated as permanently and swiftly as possible."

The port administration plans a public meeting June 1 on the risk assessment, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the North Point Edgemere Volunteer Fire Department, 7500 North Point Road. A summary of the study is available at <http://www.mpa.maryland.gov>