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'Do It Right'

Monday, August 16, 2004

For far too long, the state Department of Environmental Conservation has sidelined the public in fundamental decisions affecting the cleanup of Onondaga Lake.

Now it's come to light that the agency and the corporate giant responsible for the cleanup have quietly agreed to scrap a management tool that some scientists believe is necessary to effectively reduce mercury contamination there. Barring intervention by some powerful political deity, it's unlikely that will change. As one independent researcher puts it, "The toothpaste is already out of the tube."

Such crucial decisions should not be made without public input. ▼ From Our Advertiser

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At issue is how Honeywell International intends to rid the lake of a century's worth of pollution. In documents released earlier this month, Honeywell says it will take three years and \$237 million to clean up the mess that placed the lake on the federal Superfund list of toxic waste sites.

The DEC, however, says it might take a lot more work and money - up to \$2.3 billion and 17 years. The state wants Honeywell to consider more extensive options and respond by Sept. 1.

Honeywell's latest proposal - a highly technical document more than 1,800 pages long - left some experts shaking their heads. All acknowledge that the job will be complicated. But some profoundly disagree on how best to make the lake safe for swimming and fish consumption. The dispute over a mercury-abatement management tool or "model" is but one example.

Unfortunately, the public won't be allowed to weigh in until later this year. The state is supposed to recommend a cleanup plan by Nov. 29, then choose a final plan in spring 2005. In between, it will solicit public comment. Would that be too late in the game to make major changes?

The DEC should have been much more inclusive all along. Scientists at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Syracuse and Cornell universities, the Upstate Freshwater Institute and other groups have been studying the lake for decades but have been kept at arm's length.

U.S. Rep. James Walsh, R-Onondaga, chairs the House Appropriations

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subcommittee that oversees the Environmental Protection Agency and the Superfund program. He says he'll insist that any Honeywell cleanup plan meet the approval of the scientific community. "I've always said we have to do it right this time," Walsh said. "So it's essential that not only the public officials and the people are satisfied, but that the scientists are satisfied."

It's been 15 years since the state went to court to force a cleanup. The DEC should "do it right" by inviting meaningful, independent scientific participation now.

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