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NEW OFFSHORE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT SUPPORTS NEED FOR CLEANUP MEASURES AT SPARROWS POINT

State study begins to lay foundation for selection of corrective measures to address long-term human health and ecological impacts of offshore contamination in Coke Point area

BALTIMORE, MD – A new environmental study of the offshore area surrounding a portion of the Sparrows Point steelmaking property known as Coke Point suggests that long-term (30 years) exposure to contaminated sediments and surface waters adjacent to Coke Point may result in elevated risks to human health and ecological resources. The study focused on the waters and sediment immediately surrounding Coke Point and supports the need for remedial measures to address offshore contamination in these areas. Since the entry of a 1997 Consent Decree with Bethlehem Steel Corporation, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) have been actively overseeing the ongoing cleanup efforts with regard to the onshore contamination in the area.

The Coke Point Offshore Risk Assessment was commissioned by the Maryland Port Administration (MPA). MPA is evaluating a portion of the Coke Point peninsula as a potential site for a new Dredged Material Containment Facility.

“The location of a containment facility at Coke Point is one option under consideration as the Port of Baltimore seeks future dredged material placement sites,” said Transportation Secretary Beverley K. Swaim-Staley. “However, the benefit of examining the Coke Point location is that data has now been produced that can help guide private and public sector environmental clean-up efforts at the site.”

“While we have been hard at work ensuring that the onshore contamination is being addressed, the completion of this study gives us a much better understanding of the scope and nature of the offshore contamination associated with Coke Point,” MDE Secretary Robert M. Summers said. “People who crab or fish in these areas should refer to the existing consumption advisories. For nearly a decade, there have been fish consumption advisories in effect for these waters; this study reaffirms that guidance. We understand the communities’ concern and agree that this contamination is not acceptable. Additional action by the owners of the property must be taken as soon as possible to address the contamination.”

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Assessment Supports Need for Cleanup Measures at Sparrows Point

The Risk Assessment, on which EPA and MDE provided design input, evaluated potential risks to human health based on lifetime exposure (30 years of exposure over a 70 year lifetime) to sediment and surface waters immediately offshore (within 1,000 feet) of Coke Point, which is the most heavily contaminated area of Sparrows Point. Monitoring conducted for this study showed levels of contaminants in the waters adjacent to Coke Point to be elevated above those in the Patapsco River. Projections using this data and models assuming long-term exposure (30 years) suggest that individuals who have water contact through swimming, crabbing, or fishing near Coke Point over a period of many years may have elevated health risks.

Based on tissue samples collected from crabs and fish in the adjacent waters, the study concluded that potential health risks from consumption of fish and crabs were comparable to other areas of the Patapsco River. Fish consumption advisories for fish and crabs caught in the Patapsco River have been in place for nearly a decade and were updated based on 2008 data. These advisories, which are designed to be fully protective of human health, are available at:

<http://www.mde.state.md.us/programs/Marylander/CitizensInfoCenterHome/Pages/citizensinfocenter/fishandshellfish/index.aspx>

The study also assessed ecological risks for aquatic and benthic organisms such as fish, crabs, worms, and clams, and for other wildlife living on and around the Coke Point shoreline. The study found that the potential risk from contamination in offshore sediments and surface water to aquatic and benthic organisms is at a level that warrants remedial measures to reduce the risk. The study found that a similar risk to wildlife borders on a level that warrants remedial measures.

The 1997 Consent Decree

The 2,300-acre Sparrows Point property is subject to a 1997 Judicial Consent Decree, overseen by MDE and EPA. The Consent Decree requires a comprehensive site investigation and cleanup to address contamination at the site.

“The Sparrows Point property, with its history of more than a century of industrial pollution, is perhaps the most complex cleanup site in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. In recent years, however, significant progress has been made in this difficult endeavor,” Secretary Summers said. “Since 2007, MDE and EPA have significantly increased the pressure on the owners of the Sparrows Point property to move from assessing contamination at the site to taking more aggressive cleanup actions and are litigating in court to compel the companies to conduct an assessment of offshore contamination.”

These aggressive actions have significantly advanced the clean-up efforts. Since 2008, soil and groundwater sampling for the on-site investigation have been completed and the results will be incorporated into the final site-wide assessment report. The slope stabilization project at Greys Landfill and the installation of a new monitoring well network have been completed. Groundwater samples are obtained periodically from the monitoring wells to detect any potential movement of contaminants from the site.

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Two of the six proposed treatment cells to recover and treat benzene contamination of groundwater in the Coke Point area are operational with two additional cells on schedule to be operational by July 2011. Plans for slope regrading and interim operational requirements at the Coke Point landfill are being finalized. Additional information about the activities related to the 1997 Consent Decree can be found [here](#).

Next Steps

MDE, in conjunction with EPA, will continue aggressive implementation of the Consent Decree, ensuring that the property owner continues the onshore clean up at the facility.

“The completion of this risk assessment is an important step in moving to the next phase of the cleanup work,” said Secretary Summers. “It begins to lay the foundation for an expanded assessment of the remaining offshore area, and selection and implementation of remedial measures by the property owners, subject to the approval and oversight of MDE and EPA.”

A risk assessment of other offshore areas surrounding the Sparrows Point Steel Mill facility, including portions of Bear Creek and Old Road Bay, must also be completed. Once the offshore conditions have been fully evaluated, identification and implementation of appropriate corrective measures will proceed.

As part of its evaluation of the Coke Point site for a potential Dredged Material Containment Facility, the MPA will examine the feasibility of incorporating remedial measures to address offshore contamination at the site in any future design. If the MPA were to decide to proceed with such a facility at Coke Point, any evaluation and selection of remedial options would be done in consultation with EPA and MDE and subject to public review and comment.

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