

# Neglected Rouge: scum, sediment, sludge, stink

**Editor's note:** The state Water Resources Commission (WRC) on Oct. 1 will tour southeastern Michigan's Rouge River in the morning. The WRC will meet at 2 p.m. in the Ford Fairlane estate on the University of Michigan — Dearborn campus, 2 1/2 miles south of Ford Road. On the agenda is a resolution to create a public involvement process for cleaning up the Rouge Basin.

This article is condensed from an outline of the Rouge problem by James E. Murray, who chairs the WRC.

By James E. Murray  
special writer

**T**HE ROUGE River is the dirtiest river in Michigan and perhaps the dirtiest in the Great Lakes Region. It has been assigned the status of a Class "A" Area of Concern by the International Joint Commission on the Great Lakes Basin.

The Rouge is 125 miles in length with four channels — Lower, Middle, Upper

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and Main Branches — and 50 miles are in public ownership. The basin is 487 square miles and contains 1.5 million residents.

There are 180 combined sewer overflow (CSO) points along the Rouge. As an alternative to constructing separate storm drains and sanitary drains, combined sewers were constructed years ago to save money.

They were designed to overflow only during large storms, which happen infrequently.

**MANY OVERFLOW** gates have been known to stick open, allowing raw sewage to flow continuously into the river. Further, they are not monitored and have no regular maintenance. The

overflows have become more frequent (30 to 40 times per year) since widespread development has occurred in the basin.

Eighty CSOs are under the jurisdiction of Detroit. The rest (100) are Wayne County's and other jurisdictions within the basin. Oakland County has at least 12 known overflow points that occur from separated sanitary sewers. There are 34 communities within the Rouge Basin located in three counties (Wayne, Oakland and Washtenaw). The headwaters of the Rouge extend into the eastern edge of Washtenaw County on the west, Walled Lake on the north, west and near Pontiac on the north. Little or no collective involvement in identifying basin problems has occurred.

**THE ROUGE** is known as an industrial river. However, much of its length flows past or adjacent to residential subdivisions.

Sediment beds caused by the overflow discharges, plus discharges from ill-maintained equipment, have been known to accumulate throughout the Rouge Basin. The sediment beds have gotten several feet thick in areas, have broken up and floated to the surface, and then floated downstream to the Detroit River.

In Melvindale, a steady flow of scum and sediment particles on the surface of the river is common. Odors from the sediment are that of human waste.

The sediment on the river bottom continuously gives off bubbles of methane and hydrogen sulfide gas, particularly in the main branch south of Michigan Avenue.

The evidence of sanitary waste discharges are apparent on the bushes, trees and along the Rouge and open drain tributaries in the areas of overflow. Sanitary napkins, toilet paper, etc., adhere to the woody plants in these areas and line the banks and bottom of the channel. The river becomes so odorous that people avoid even walking along its banks.

**PAST EFFORTS** to bring about remedial actions on the Rouge have not accomplished anything because of:

- A lack of public involvement in identifying the problems, setting goals and implementing remedies.

- \$100 million spent in planning for Super Sewer, Detroit Waste Water Treatment, etc., with no known attention to Rouge River problems. Only \$10 million has been spent for corrective action. DNR failed to forcefully pursue the cleanup of the Rouge in facility plans for southeast Michigan.

- No attempt to integrate water quality improvements with economic, recreational and aesthetic potentials of the Rouge. This is necessary in order to gain the support of public officials, interest groups and citizens in cleaning up the river. Spending money on eliminating polluted discharges is not going to gain public support if the river remains unsightly and full of log jams, supermarket baskets, car batteries and car bodies.

**A TRIP** TO the Rouge River Basin leaves one struck by the lack of open views to the river.

Along Hines Drive in western Wayne County, the focus is on the road as the central attraction in the Middle Rouge Branch. Unless a visitor was told there was a river in the area, he/she would never suspect that the Rouge flowed within yards of the road. This phenomenon is not found in many urban areas in or outside of Michigan.

The lack of focus on this "hidden" part of the park is so apparent and widespread that illegal dumping and the presence of human industrial waste, debris and logjams in the river exist and persist — in an area with the greatest concentration of the state's population.

This is typical of the four branches of the Rouge River.

**THE MICHIGAN** Water Resources Commission, as stewards of Michigan's water resources and the water resources of the Great Lakes Basin and the body assigned to protect the public's interest, must be committed to begin and pursue to the greatest extent practicable and prudent the reclamation of the Rouge River.

This commitment must be extended to include the involvement of those public officials, interest groups and citizens in determining the goals, objectives and time frames for the reclamation process.

The process must foster a local plan with widespread public involvement developed in cooperation with basin public officials with input from both public and private interest groups. The WRC and state Department of Natural Resources must play a support

role after the project is initiated and:

- Carefully nurture the process for local involvement so a local plan emerges.

- Carefully negotiate with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for their involvement with the plan development or require EPA commitment to follow plan development and give con-

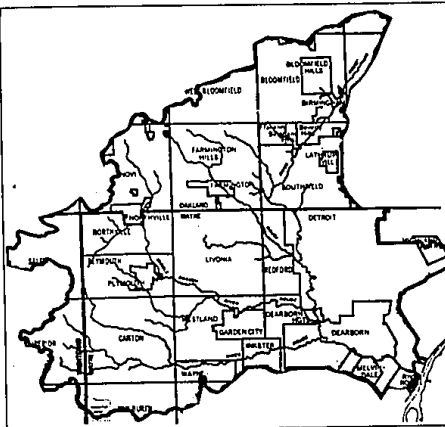
currency.

- Aggressively persuade EPA to accept reasonable goals and objectives for the Rouge Basin. Logical short-term and long-term projects can be developed to address many of the problems interfering with use of the Rouge River. Requiring too much too soon would sabotage cooperative efforts.



DAN DEAN/Staff photographer

Some 180 combined sewer overflows (CSOs) were built instead of separated storm drains and sanitary sewers. When they overflow they pour six billion gallons of wastes annually into the Rouge making it "the dirtiest river in Michigan."



The Rouge Basin drains parts of three counties and 38 local governmental units, but "little or no collective involvement in identifying problems has occurred," says the chairman of the state Water Resources Commission.

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