

Reversing the tide of pollution

By Neal Moldano
staff writer

CSO.

Those three letters are what stand between the polluted Rouge River and its potential use as a major recreational resource by the year 2005 for the metropolitan Detroit area.

CSO stands for combined sewer overflows that dump more than 6 billion gallons of raw sewage into the Rouge River each year, according to James Murray, chairman of the Michigan Water Resources Commission.

These combination sewer and wastewater systems dump untreated waste into the river because treatment facilities cannot handle the flow generated, especially during heavy rains, Murray said.

Almost all of the pollution in the Rouge — 98 percent — is caused by the 185 CSOs.

The Water Resources Commission wants to plug the problem. Separating the CSOs into individual storm water and sewer systems would prove too costly, but there are some steps that can be taken to minimize the unnecessary discharges into the river, Murray said.

"THE WATER Resources Commission is charged, under state law, with protecting the water resources of the state," he said. "No one can discharge without a permit regardless of what it is. CSOs require permits. We want (local communities) to start working on CSOs and make improvements, now."

One of the steps that has to be taken is to fix the gates that are supposed to open only during periods of heavy rainfall, Murray said.

Unfortunately, these gates are not monitored and some stick open and the sewage continues to flow even during dry weather.

Detroit, which has 80 CSOs within its borders, has budgeted \$10 million in an effort to control discharges into the river. That should solve some of the problems, Murray said.

Other local communities must maintain the gates, detain stormwater until it can be handled by treatment plants and eliminate the majority of discharges into the river.

Some CSOs discharge into the river up to 40 times a year, Murray said. The commission would like to see that number drop to once or twice every 10 years.

If those communities don't start working on the problem, Murray said, discharge permits may be denied in the future.

"THE GOAL is to control CSOs enough so we are not violating water quality standards," he said.

Another important step in reclaiming the Rouge from pollu-

tion will come if and when the \$110 million North Huron Valley project — also known as Son of Supersewer — receives funding.

"We can't solve problems in the Rouge without building it," Murray said.

The Water Resources Commission focused attention on cleanup efforts last year when it declared the Rouge a valuable resource and directed the Department of Natural Resources to develop a strategy and local participation plans to clean up Michigan's dirtiest river, said Jim Bredin, acting Rouge River coordinator for the DNR.

The DNR, in turn, contracted with the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments to develop remedial action plans — short-term, inexpensive projects that can be done with available resources, Bredin said.

An executive steering committee was formed to direct the project and local community representatives were called in for their opinion on cleanup efforts.

This year, the remedial action plans should be completed, Bredin said. By next year, the final remedial action plan, which will include the process and schedule of the cleanup efforts, also should be completed, he said.

SEMOG plans to build on the existing understanding of the Rouge. It will identify where the problems are and what steps need to be taken, said Jim Rogers of SEMCOG.

BUT THIS planning does not mean that other projects cannot go ahead now, said Bruce Monson of the Rouge River Watershed Council.

"Rouge River Day," a combination of cleanup efforts along the river and a celebration of the waterway, is scheduled for June 7.

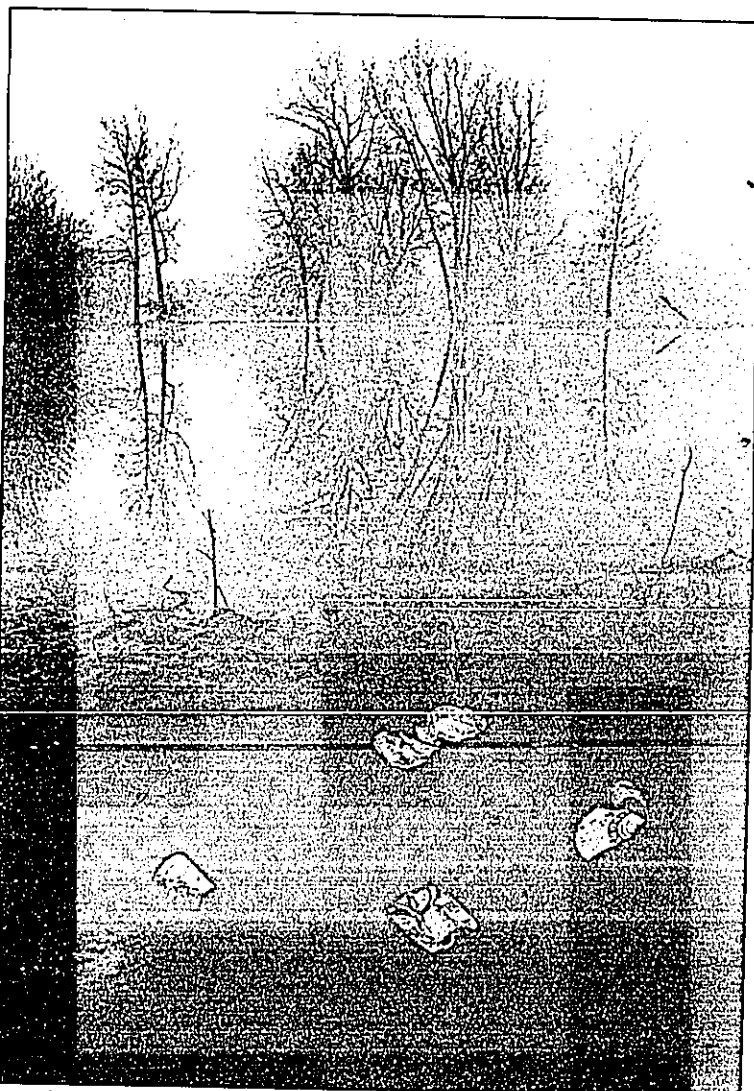
The public needs to support these efforts by participating in "Rouge River Day" and other projects, Monson said.

"It's become peace, love and clean up the Rouge," he said. "It's surprising how many small groups have been doing little cleanups in their neighborhoods."

A group called "Friends of the Rouge" has been formed to promote improving the river and this type of grassroots effort is necessary to move the project along, said Murray of the water commission.

"Their support is critical," he said. "Every citizen has said we've got to do something. We don't want an open sewer in our back yard. But they've had the feeling nothing could be done."

That feeling is changing now, but it is going to take money and time to clean the river. The state has budgeted \$350,000 this year for the effort and Ford Motor Co. has added \$50,000.



STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

Floodwaters of the Rouge push trash to new heights in the Middle Rouge Parkway on a misty morning in mid-March. The trash, although visible, constitutes only a small portion of the pollution. Sewer overflows are a bigger problem. Jim Rogers of SEMCOG, however, believes that most of

the pollution may eventually be controlled and eliminated. "It's just a matter of time if people decide they can do it," he says. "Other rivers as dirty as the Rouge have been cleaned up. It's a matter of just doing the job."

The goal is to have the river cleaned up by 2005, so people involved in the project need to temper their determination with the understanding that the problems cannot be solved overnight, he said.

"People need to be patient but

they should insist that progress be made," SEMCOG's Rogers said. "It's just a matter of time if people decide they can do it. Other rivers as dirty as the Rouge have been cleaned up. It's a matter of just doing the job."

"It's not going to be easy," Bredin added. "It won't be taken

care of in the first couple of years.

"In the past, the problem was so massive people said 'Let's worry about other problems and forget about the Rouge.' What we're saying now is 'We've solved the other problems, let's get to the Rouge.'"