

Rouge cleanup set for June 6

5,000 volunteers sought to give drive momentum

By Wayne Pool
staff writer

It's a "hidden" river, brown with sewage and industrial sediment. But a local environmental impact group believes the Rouge River is worth saving. Its members dream of returning to the days when the Rouge was filled with canoeists and fishermen, not accumulated waste from decades of abuse.

Pursuing that dream, Friends of the Rouge kicked off its second annual Rouge Rescue project Thursday at Madonna College in Livonia. They seek to spur interest in the Saturday, June 6, cleanup. A big turnout — they're shooting for 5,000 participants — is necessary to maintain the momentum generated by last year's Rouge Rescue, they say. "If the public doesn't show its support, then the politicians and bureaucrats won't be able to do what's necessary," group president Jim Murray said.

NEARLY TWO dozen sites will be targeted in this year's cleanup. Birmingham, Farmington, Farmington Hills, Southfield and Bloomfield Township are among participating Oakland County communities. Ford Motor Co. is a corporate sponsor.

Classes from 16 high schools in Wayne and Oakland counties will soon conduct water quality tests at various points along the Rouge. Their information will be fed into a University of Michigan computer bank, providing access to government officials in both counties, as well as at the Detroit Water Board. Boosters say the cleanup is an important first step toward getting government support for new sewers and expanded treatment facilities, both vital to the river's long-term

environmental health. Despite the success of last year's cleanup, which boasted 2,300 participants, and reduction of industrial pollution, environmental experts say the Rouge's problems remain "massive."

POLLUTION IS worst near Melvindale and River Rouge, where the Rouge flows into the Detroit River.

"It's so bad that it explodes black ink clouds," Murray said. In addition, older sewers are still dumping raw sewage and other wastes into the river, according to Jim Rogers, an environmental planner for the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG).

"In the 1920s and '30s that was the way to handle it — build just one sewer to handle what storm sewers and sanitary sewers do today," Rogers said.

While 180 of the older, combined sewers have been identified, group members acknowledge replacement sewers are long, and not altogether certain, in coming.

A super sewer planned in 1960 still isn't a reality, Rogers said. Getting local communities to build new sanitary sewers is politically explosive, he added.

"Cleaning up these combined sewer overflows is going to be a tough job," Rogers said.

POLLUTION FROM a second

source — gas stations, auto repair shops and other businesses whose floor drains empty into storm drains rather than sanitary sewers — has been noted, but insufficiently handled, Rogers said. Environmentalists are only beginning to locate these polluters, the SEMCOG official said.

At the same time concerns linger about the Detroit Treatment Plant's capacity to handle increased waste. But the many problems make the Rouge Rescue even more important, boosters say.

REMOVING LOGJAMS and other debris will improve the river's flow, greatly enhancing its ability to "heal itself," executive director Bonnie Anderson said.

"We need people to break up the logjams where they can," Anderson said.

Public works crews will break up logjams in areas too polluted to allow volunteers to go into the river, she added.

"In those places, volunteers will be asked to cart the debris off the riverbank," Anderson said.

Despite the problems, and long-term nature of cleanup efforts, supporters say the question remains simple. "Why should we drive 100 miles to canoe and swim when we've got a river right in our own backyard?" Rogers said.



STEVE FECHT/Staff photographer

Logjam on Rouge chokes water flow, causes flooding and creates stagnant pools for mosquito breeding grounds.

Video promotes Rouge cleanup

A 12-minute videotape seeking support of the Rouge River cleanup effort is ready for 1,500 schools and community groups.

Rouge Rescue '87 will take place June 6 at 21 sites along the river in metro Detroit. For information on the program and this year's cleanup effort call: 42-ROUGE (427-6843).

A WJBK-TV team, headed by meteorologist Ted Textor, a board member of Friends of the Rouge, spent two weeks in canoes videotaping wildlife, pollution and interviews with people up and down the river. The video is an addition to high school science courses in metro Detroit. A curriculum guide has been

developed that incorporates the video and a workbook for schools participating in the pilot program.

Some 16 high schools will be using the Rouge River as an outdoor laboratory. Their students, armed with scientific equipment provided by the Friends of the Rouge citizens group, will study the problems experienced by rivers in an urban setting during field trips to the Rouge River.

Among the 16 are: Athens High School, Troy; North Farmington; Detroit Country Day, Birmingham; Churchill, Livonia; Redford Union; Garden City; Plymouth Salem; Wayne Memorial, and Southfield.

How to volunteer

The following people are looking for volunteers to assist in Rouge Rescue '87.

- Birmingham — Coco Siewert, 642-7024.
- Farmington — Earl Billing, 473-7250.
- Farmington Hills — Dale Countag, 473-9520.
- Southfield — Steve Marshall, 354-9546.

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