

Rouge cleanup spreads to include Oakland County

BY RALPH R. ECHTINAW
STAFF WRITER

Pulling old tires out of the Rouge River just isn't enough anymore.

Friends of the Rouge, an organization that sponsors such cleanups of the river every year, has some high-powered help now that the federal government has stepped in.

With a federal grant of more than \$125 million and more expected to come, area officials are bent on cleaning the Rouge River in a wide-angle approach that includes communities from Bloomfield Township to Westland.

Called the Rouge River National Wet Weather Demonstration Project, the venture seeks to bring cleanliness to the Rouge by spreading awareness and retention basins all over the area that feeds the river.

"This is a great benefit to all taxpayers," said Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn. "It's fantastic!"

The first of its kind in the nation, this pilot project was pushed through congress by representatives William Ford, D-Ypsilanti Township, and John Dingell, D-Dearborn.

"We're not only fixing the problems in our backyard, but we're in the spotlight," said James Murray, Wayne County public works director. "Industrial countries throughout the world will be watching."

The idea is that every pollutant dumped on the ground or in the water all over the Rouge basin will eventually get into the river. "All of us who live in the Rouge basin live on the banks of the Rouge River," said James Ridgway, one of the project coordinators.

Observer & Eccentric communities involved in the project are Bloomfield Hills, Bloomfield Township, Birmingham, Beverly Hills, Bingham Farms, Franklin, Troy, West Bloomfield, Westland, Farmington, Farmington Hills, Livonia, Redford, Garden City, Plymouth, Plymouth Township and Canton Township.

"For years the Rouge River has been perhaps the greatest waste of a major waterway in America," said Wayne County Executive Edward McNamara, who spoke at a meeting recently of more than 200 representatives of the 48 communities in the Rouge basin. "Most people have never known the Rouge as a place for recre-

ation. They have only known it as a sewer. But with the help of the federal government the Rouge will once again be a place for boating, swimming and fishing."

The difference between this clean-up effort and past attempts is that, for the first time, the pollution created when water drains from roads, lawns and downspouts will be examined and addressed on a basinwide basis.

"We will help (citizens) understand how they've been part of the

problem," said Wayne County Public Works Director James Murray. "They'll have to change their lawn care fertilizing methods, disconnect downspouts (that flow into sewers) and discover different ways to dispose of hazardous household waste."

Ridgway said that six billion gallons of untreated sewage still flow into the Rouge every year, much of it when sewers that combine sanitary and storm drain functions exceed capacity during

heavy rains.

Ergo, part of the project calls for overflow holding tanks to be built in Redford, Birmingham, Beverly Hills, Southfield, Bloomfield Hills and five other cities.

Kuhn said the overflow tanks are about as big as football fields. "The size of the tanks is pretty big and awesome," he said.

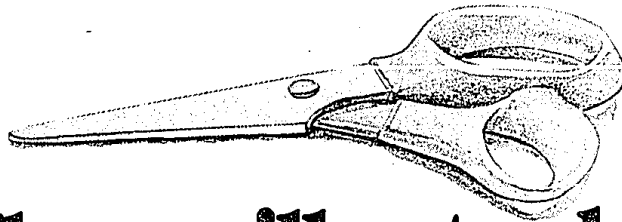
Coordinating all this stuff will be a computer network called the geographical information system, which is supposed to enable offi-

cials to compile statistical information and generate computer images that can be used to predict the effects of rainfall on any given area of the Rouge drainage system. It should also be able to predict the effects of residents disconnecting downspouts from the sewer system.

The project is expected to take 20 years to complete, Murray said, and cost taxpayers more than \$1 billion in just the first 12

years. Most of that is expected to come from the federal government, but no one can be certain that the water (or dollars in this case) won't be cut off before fruition time.

Another potential problem is convincing the 48 communities and 1.5 million residents in the Rouge basin to cooperate. "It's technically difficult, it's politically difficult. It's institutionally difficult," said Ridgway.



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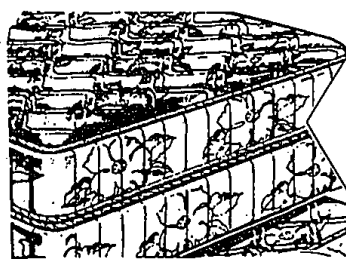
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