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Tidings

The Newsletter of the Friends of Perdido Bay

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www.friendsofperdidobay.com

Welcome to a New Year and Welcome to Our New Members

We hope 2017 will be a year of change. Already we have had several events which have changed Perdido Bay. We promise to keep you informed of the changes as we learn of them. But it should not be a boring year.

The Explosion

On Sunday evening, January 22, 2017, one of several pulp digesters at International Paper exploded spewing what is termed “black liquor” on Woodbury (this is not a pun) subdivision to the east. Black liquor is the cooking liquid in which the fibers in wood chips are separated from the lignin. The cooking liquid is sodium hydroxide and sulfur. In this case the “black liquor” also contained the partially digested pulp which besides the wood fibers probably also had fatty acids and resins from the pines trees. Paper mill digesters are big pressure cookers and the pine chips are cooked under pressure in this very alkaline solution. According to newspaper reports, IP hired a cleanup and re-mediation company and a scientific firm to monitor the effects of the explosion on the neighborhood and surrounding environment. It has been very difficult to obtain information from the environmental agencies about what actually caused the explosion and the progress of repairs at the mill.

In mid-Feb, IP did release some preliminary results of the testing. As of February 12, 347 properties to the east of the mill had been assessed for fallout from the explosion. 145 residences and 3 businesses had been confirmed as impacted and 63 properties had been confirmed as cleaned up. Both land impacted by the blast and air were being sampled for various parameters. Because sulfur is used in the cooking process, various forms of sulfur were measured as well as carbon content, pH and saltiness. I looked through the results of the testing and did not see any obvious dangerous values. Of

course, no one was testing the air at the time of the explosion, which is when the harmful effects of the explosion would have occurred.

IP began testing and cleaning up the mess a day or two after the explosion. And I can imagine it was a mess. A strong alkaline solution (the pH measured 9 to 12 on the pH scale) is not particularly good for paint jobs on cars, lawns, roofs, skin, and maybe lungs if you breathed the stuff at the time of the explosion. The report IP put out also referred to the stuff as “sticky”. After the black liquor with the partially digested pulp dried, I imagine it was very difficult, to remove. And the week after the explosion, little to no rain occurred. Maybe that was a blessing for surrounding waterways, as the goop stayed pretty much where it landed and did not get washed into our bays. Since the black liquor went to the East of the mill, the watershed which would have been impacted was the Escambia Bay watershed and not the Perdido Watershed. It is raining as I write this newsletter, so I hope most of the black liquor has been cleaned up and is not dissolving and running into streams in the Escambia watershed.

Any reported health effects or other damages has been very tightly controlled by IP and the media. No one was killed from the blast. A “unified command” which was composed of environmental officials from EPA and DEP, the Escambia County Health Department and IP officials have been monitoring and directing the cleanup. Information is hard to get. One article in the Pensacola News Journal on February 15th reported that one mill operator was “trapped” by the flood of black liquor in a control tower on the mill site for more than one hour. The News Journal article also reported that West Florida Hospital emergency room had several visitors complaining of abdominal pain shortly after the blast. Three weeks after the explosion residents in the Woodbury neighborhood were still worried about their health and several law firms were hovering around. IP claimed that there was no health risk from the explosion. Damages to property were being covered by IP but they did not disclose the amounts.

The Monday after the explosion on Sunday, I went down to look at the bay as I do everyday. I could not believe how beautiful the bay looked - clear, tea-colored water with no foam. I had not read about the IP explosion, but I knew that something had happened. Later on Monday I read about the blast. The following day on Tuesday, the bay was still beautiful. By Wednesday (2-days after the explosion), the bay was still clear but was darker and foam began appearing. I knew just from looking at the bay, IP had begun using their treatment ponds, maybe to treat the material from the clean-up. As I write this newsletter, IP has not reported restarting production, but from looking at the bay, I think there maybe some limited production at the mill. IP has several other digesters they could use to produce pulp and then cardboard from the pulp.

Immediately after I heard about the explosion, I made plans to test Perdido Bay near the outfall into Elevenmile Creek and Tee and Wicker Lakes along the shoreline of northern Perdido Bay . These are the areas where IP effluent flows out into Perdido Bay. A dead boat battery and the windy weather kept me from going out until Monday, January

30, over a week after the explosion. The Bay was still clear but foam was present indicating some mill activity. Water samples were taken to a certified lab for analysis; the results have not yet been received. I did take oxygen and salinity readings. I could not believe how good the oxygen readings were. At the first bend in Elevenmile Creek, oxygen readings were all above 50% saturation, even at a depth of 20 feet. In the past, oxygen readings were rarely over 40% saturation at the surface and close to 0% saturation at deeper depths. The oxygen reading at the mouth of Tee Lake was 92% saturation. It had been running less than 30% the last time I was there. I was not able to take the boat into these lakes because the tide was low and without the 30+ million gallons a day flowing out of the lakes, the mouth to the lakes was very shallow with stumps. I am sure the chemical analysis will reflect the improvement in water quality due to reduced pollution load from the papermill.

Just what IP intends to do with the mill is not known to us. IP's spokesperson said, after the explosion, that they were going to get the mill up and running as soon as possible. Friends of Perdido Bay's position is that when IP fixes their digester they should also fix their treatment so that they are not ruining Perdido Bay. Friends of Perdido Bay has never advocated shutting the mill down. The area's economy and jobs are at stake. So what happens with the mill is IP's call. There have been several people advocating for IP to shut the mill down. Not us. However, there are several reasons the mill might shut down. One reason is the equipment at the mill is very old - very old. The recovery furnaces at the mill (where the black liquor is burned and the salts recovered) must date back to the 1950's. Another reason is that over time the mill has become surrounded by development. It is almost an urban mill, and running old equipment around so much development is risky.

Another "accident" in which the Cantonment mill was involved, was the flooding of homes in the Bristol Park neighborhood on Elevenmile Creek after the massive rainfall in April 2014. There was a lawsuit against IP but I don't know what happened in this lawsuit. The DEP did not fine IP for this deluge as they said it was an act of God. Recently Escambia County got a FEMA grant to buy out homes in Bristol Park and Asbury Hills neighborhoods. The County was offering 130 homeowners appraised value for their homes, but many homeowners refused to sell at the low appraised value. To date, Escambia County commissioners have voted to purchase 6 parcels and several more people may sell some property. Escambia County plans on using this 14.5 acres to improve stormwater control in these neighborhoods which were built in the flood plain of Elevenmile Creek. We certainly would welcome any increased storm water protection as the watershed of Elevenmile Creek is developing rapidly.

There are several other reasons, IP may decide to shut down - they have just taken over Werehausyer's pulp mills and maybe have excess capacity; IP's property tax exemption in Escambia County runs out in December 2017, and IP's permit has expired and it doesn't look like they will be able to get another, unless they do some extreme cleanup. However, if IP does shut down, they will have to do some extensive cleanup at the mill. A recent report put out by Northwest Florida Water Management District (see next article) said that the IP mill in Cantonment is on the National Priority List as a Superfund site. That is no surprise, but it is a liability which must be addressed. In the

meantime, Perdido Bay has been very clear and it looks like some life is coming back - like mullet and menhaden. Keep looking for oysters on the pilings of the Lillian bridge.

A Draft Management Plan

Management plans for Perdido Bay keep rolling off the presses, even though there has been very little sampling of Perdido Bay by the environmental agencies in the past 10 years. I wonder how you can manage a waterbody if you don't have a clear idea of its health or lack of health. About the only way to assess a bay's health is to sample. But in spite of the lack of recent sampling, this management plan has some good interesting information about the Perdido Watershed. This is the 2017 SWIM plan for Perdido Watershed put out by the Northwest Florida Water Management District. So far it is only in Draft form but I will put it on our website. SWIM stands for Surface Water Improvement and Management. Much of the management which the Northwest Florida Water Management District does involves purchasing land along water bodies in the watershed. We hope the water management district does more of that in the Perdido Watershed. While the watershed is currently lightly developed (approximately 75% to 70% of the watershed is in timberlands), development will occur. Recently I heard that a big amusement park is coming to Foley. So it is important to buy tracts of land along Perdido River and its tributaries to preserve the wildness and cleanliness of the river.

One piece of information in the draft management plan which I thought was newsworthy was the mention that Escambia and Perdido Bays may be accepted into the National Estuarine Program. I know Escambia County Commissioners voted to nominate both estuaries for the program. This program provides extra money so that the estuaries may be cleaned up. Mobile Bay has been a part of the national estuarine program for many years. The Tampa Bay National Estuarine Program has been very successful at reducing nutrients into Tampa Bay. However according to the SWIM report, a group formed to manage Escambia Bay called the Bay Area Resource Management Council (BARC) would be running the program for both bays. I always thought that the BARC was really just a coalition of the big polluters on Escambia Bay. If Perdido Bay does become part of the National Estuarine Program, we should have our own management group and not be part of Escambia Bay's group. We could resurrect the Florida/Alabama Water Resources Coordinating Council. We will see.

Membership and Renewals

Tidings is published six times a year by Friends of Perdido Bay and is mailed to members. To keep up with the latest news of happenings on Perdido Bay, become a member or renew your membership. For present members, your date for renewal is printed on your mailing label.

Membership is \$10.00 per **year per voting member**. To join or renew, fill out the coupon to the right and mail with your check to the address on the front.

Friends is a not-for-profit corporation and all contributions are tax-deductible. Funds received are all used for projects to improve Perdido Bay. No money is paid to the Board of Directors, all of whom volunteer their time and effort.

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