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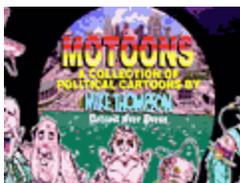
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Detroit, Rouge oil spills worse than estimated

New figure for 2 rivers is up to 5,000 gallons

April 12, 2002

BY DAN SHINE

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The U.S. Coast Guard raised its estimate of oil spilled in the Detroit and Rouge rivers from 500 gallons to up to 5,000 Thursday as the investigation into finding the source intensified.

As cleanup continued, scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration were taking samples of the heavyweight, used oil recovered from the two rivers in order to give it a "fingerprint," U.S. Coast Guard Chief Adam Wine said.

"That fingerprint can then be taken to businesses and industries nearby to find a match," Wine said.

The detective work could take several days or longer, Wine said. Investigators also have been aided by residents calling in tips.

"We don't know if there's one or two sources, or more," he said.

A spill was discovered late Tuesday near a sewer drain that empties into the Rouge River. Containment booms were used, and cleanup began Wednesday.

That same day, several oil slicks were discovered in the Detroit River from Zug Island south to Pointe Mouillee in Lake Erie. Containment booms were placed around some

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larger slicks to protect environmentally sensitive shorelines such as Humbug Marsh and Pointe Mouillee. A 1-2-foot band of oil ran along the shoreline of Lake Erie Metropark.

Cleanup is expected to last at least a week.

The Rouge, which was closed to boat traffic Wednesday, was reopened Thursday on a limited basis. But the boat launch at Elizabeth Park in Trenton, popular with fishermen -- especially now during walleye season -- was closed Thursday.

As a result, the boat launch at Lake Erie Metropark experienced an overflow crowd Thursday. That's where Jeff Ellis of Southgate was headed after finding he couldn't launch his fishing boat at Elizabeth Park. Ellis fished in the Detroit River near the Trenton Channel on Wednesday and came out with an oily boat.

"It was a mess, but I wiped it all down with some rags," he said.

Jim Graham, executive director of Friends of the Rouge, said news of the spill hit the organization hard. As recently as the early 1990s, people had written off the Rouge as a heavily polluted waterway.

Now people canoe parts of the Rouge and celebrate the river at an annual water festival. There also is an annual cleanup day, scheduled this year for June 1.

More than \$600 million has been spent on cleaning up the Rouge since 1992, when it was named a federal demonstration project.

Gregory Button, communications director of The Ecology Center in Ann Arbor, said the spills will have a lasting impact on the environment.

"Generally, less than 5 percent of any spill is recovered," said Button, who has studied oil spills around the world, including the Exxon Valdez.

Button said that although oil does float, changes over time in water temperature and viscosity cause it to sink and settle at the bottom.

Wildlife also can be affected. Birds that clean themselves will ingest the oil, causing digestive problems. Reptiles and amphibians are coming out of hibernation to head back to the water and may come in contact with the oil.

A group of volunteers was ready to clean any oily birds, but by late Thursday none had been found.

Contact *DAN SHINE* at 313-223-4554 or dshine@freepress.com.

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