Riffles

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THE MESS AT SMURFIT-STONE

A LIVING RIVER, A TOXIC LEGACY

SITUATED IN THE HEART of the ancestral homelands of the Salish, Kalispel, and Ksanka peoples, the Clark Fork River plays an important part not only in the history of the region, but also in the present and future for all who live here. Rising out of the Continental Divide and flowing through a 14 million-acre basin, the river is a magnet for recreation, an economic driver for our riverside communities, an agricultural resource, and rich habitat for bountiful fish and wildlife.

After weathering decades of heavy industrial use, many sections of the Clark Fork River have been cleaned up thanks to the hard work of citizens, conservationists, Tribal nations, and government officials. The river is cleaner now than most of us remember it ever being in our lifetimes. Yet, a major threat to the Clark Fork remains: the shuttered Smurfit-Stone pulp and paper mill near Frenchtown.

The mill operated for 53 years, discharging enormous amounts of wastewater into the river and discarding industrial and toxic wastes in unlined dumps, sludge ponds, and wastewater settling ponds next to the river. The huge dumps cover roughly 140–190 acres, as big as the entire University of Montana campus. The only thing separating the site from the river is an old, deteriorating gravel berm.

The wastewater ponds at the mill were drained long ago, but the soil and groundwater remain polluted with dangerous toxins, including PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), dioxins, furans, and arsenic. The fish in this reach of the Clark Fork and downstream suffer from contamination. All species of fish in this reach are unsafe for human consumption.

Smurfit-Stone is now being investigated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under Superfund law. The EPA must direct all cleanup activity to ensure that the site is protective of human health and the environment. The polluters, meanwhile, are responsible for paying for the investigation and the cleanup. In this case, that's industry giants International Paper and WestRock, the largest and third-largest pulp and paper mills in the world. In 2015, these previous owners of Smurfit-Stone agreed to conduct an investigation and cleanup of the environmental contamination. Eight years later, the investigation is still underway. No significant cleanup has occurred.

Shockingly, at the current speed, cleanup is still 20 to 30 years in the future, if at all. Our most urgent step now is to compel the EPA to get started on acutely problematic areas—the sludge ponds and waste dumps—before it's too late.

Photo: ©Chris Boyer / Kestrelaerial.com

LEAKING, UNSAFE, AND ILLEGAL

Much of the waste generated by the Smurfit-Stone pulp mill is still onsite—strewn across 1,000 acres right next to the Clark Fork River. Within that toxic area, roughly 140–190 acres of unlined sludge ponds and landfills pose the greatest risks. Thirteen years after the mill closed, the 3,200-acre industrial site is still poisoning the groundwater and river. These pollutants harm fish and wildlife and put the health of Tribal subsistence fishers at risk.

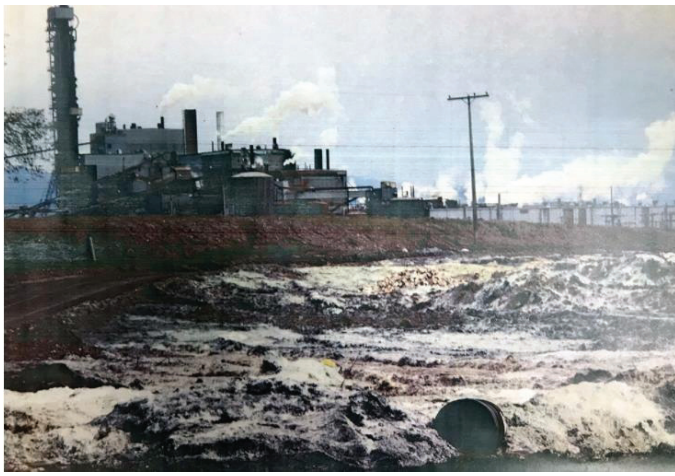
Not only are the dumps leaking toxic chemicals into the groundwater that flows to the river, the only thing separating much of this wasteland from the river is an uncertified, crumbling four-mile-long earthen berm that's riddled with rodent holes.

Last July, we talked with three experts to get more information on the leaking dumps, the crumbling berm, and the illegal burden on the river. You can listen to these experts in new episodes of our podcast *Toxic: The Mess at Smurfit-Stone*.

In the podcast, Karin Boyd from Applied Geomorphology told us how the river naturally moves through its channel migration zone, a dynamic path not confined to the current banks. Applied Geomorphology specifically studied the berms and found a thin, crumbling line between a powerful river with nowhere else to go and a floodplain polluted with waste. In short, the berm isn't a long-term solution.

Next, hydrogeologist Elena Evans from Missoula Water Quality District talked about how the unlined dumps are leaking directly into groundwater that flows into the river. But the full picture is still unknown. The EPA's test sites are spread thinly over a massive area and have yet to fully capture the pathways between contaminated groundwater and the river. Further, despite requests from the Montana Natural Resource Damage Program and the public, the site-owners have refused to conduct studies on fish or wildlife to determine where toxins are ending up and how they move through the food chain.

Finally, CFC Legal Director Andrew Gorder discussed site contamination through a legal lens. There are dozens of state, federal, and local laws that apply to the core environmental or human health problems at the mill, but for much of its lifetime, Smurfit operated in a regulatory vacuum. For example, state and federal laws governing the disposal and storage of solid wastes were enacted after the mill had dumped millions of tons of sludge and other wastes into unlined, unmonitored dumps on site. In other words, if Smurfit were operating today, its unlined dumps and sludge ponds would be illegal. The EPA must consider all of these protective laws and regulations when it crafts its remedy for cleaning up contamination at the site.



Smurfit-Stone had already dumped millions of tons of sludge and other wastes into unlined, unmonitored dumps on site before regulatory laws were put in place.

Not only are the dumps leaking toxic chemicals into the groundwater that flows to the river, the only thing separating much of this wasteland from the river is an uncertified, crumbling four-mile-long earthen berm that's riddled with rodent holes.

LISTEN to the podcast

CLARK FORK NAMED ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST ENDANGERED RIVERS

THE NATIONAL CONSERVATION nonprofit American Rivers has named the Clark Fork River among America's Most Endangered Rivers®, citing industrial pollution and flooding risks from the shuttered Smurfit-Stone pulp mill that threatens the river's recovery.

"Missoula, downstream communities, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes deserve clean water and edible fish. Cleaning up Smurfit-Stone is not just the right thing to do, it's a smart economic decision since cleanup now is less expensive than cleanup after a disaster," said American Rivers Western Montana Associate Conservation Director Lisa Ronald.

The Clark Fork Coalition and partners are working with American Rivers to put pressure on the Environmental Protection Agency to accelerate additional testing and start cleanup at Smurfit-Stone.

"The Clark Fork River is in the heart of our ancestral homelands, but it's like being punched in the gut when you have something like Smurfit in that location. We want to restore the floodplain, reclaim lost pieces of our culture, and honor our treaty and our ancestors," said Council Chairman for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Tom McDonald.

The annual America's Most Endangered Rivers report is a list of rivers at a crossroads, where key decisions in the coming months will determine these rivers' fates. Over the years, the report has helped spur many successes including protecting Montana rivers from new dams, gold and copper mining, and transportation impacts like industrial spills. Let's add the Clark Fork River to the list of successes and clean Smurfit now.

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—Tom McDonald, Council Chairman for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

Photo: ©Seth Warren / Elements Mixed Media

CLARK FORK RIVER FISH SAMPLING EFFORT UNDERWAY

A sampling effort is currently underway that will dramatically expand our knowledge of fish consumption hazards in western Montana and better inform the recreating public about the risks of consuming fish.

Photo: Rachel Neal

FISH IN THE CLARK FORK RIVER are not safe to eat. In 2020, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) extended its fish consumption advisory to all species of fish from the Clark Fork's confluence with the Bitterroot River downstream to its confluence with the Flathead River, a distance of 148 river miles. FWP's "do not eat" guidance is based on the alarming levels of dioxins, furans, and PCBs found in fish tissue.

Despite years of pushing to learn more about the potential sources of these contaminants (which include the Smurfit mill site), the EPA leadership responsible for Smurfit has not compelled the site owners to conduct additional sampling of surface water, fish, or other aquatic life. However, thanks to the initiative of Montana Trout Unlimited, FWP, Natural Resource Damage Program, Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes, and the Clark Fork Coalition, a sampling effort is currently underway that will dramatically expand our knowledge of fish consumption hazards in western Montana and better inform the recreating public about the risks of consuming fish. The effort is made possible with EPA funding through the Columbia River Toxins Grant program.

For the study, researchers will gather data from 18 different locations stretching from the headwaters of the Clark Fork all the way to the Idaho border. This data collection has multiple objectives. First, samples collected from game fish will help FWP analyze risks to both tribal and recreational consumers from mercury, dioxins and furans, and PCBs. Second, passive water samplers will allow FWP to quantify the presence of these contaminants, and hopefully help identify the source (or sources) within the watershed.

FWP staff have already begun harvesting fish for the study from multiple sites in the Upper Clark Fork River. From May until June, they plan to continue these efforts downstream and collect fish from the Middle and Lower Clark Fork, Lower Blackfoot, and Bitterroot Rivers as well as the Lower Flathead. The passive water samplers will be deployed in late summer once the rivers have dropped from their peak summer flows.

The results of the study will help answer questions about the health of the Clark Fork River and the communities it supports. It's also a critical piece of the Smurfit-Stone puzzle that will reveal the extent of dioxin, furan, and PCB contamination in fish downstream of the shuttered mill.

CLEAN SMURFIT NOW ~ Sign the Petition

THE RIVER SUSTAINS US, gives us food, and supports our livelihoods. We have a duty of care for the river, too. We want the Clark Fork River returned to a condition where it functions ecologically, sustaining healthy wildlife and plant life. The river is not a waste dump for companies to pollute and then abandon.

Local stakeholders—including the Clark Fork Coalition, Missoula County Water Quality District, Montana Trout Unlimited, Montana Public Interest Research Group (MontPIRG), Hellgate Hunters and Anglers, Frenchtown Community Advisory Group, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the Kalispel Tribe, and the Montana Natural Resource Damage Program—dream of a clean site where people can live, play, and connect with the river and wild nature can flourish.

Getting the cleanup the river needs and downstream communities deserve will require widespread, vocal support to make sure the EPA holds the potentially responsible parties accountable for their industrial mess.

This summer, if you live in the Frenchtown area, you might see a friendly new face on your doorstep, clipboard in hand. The student-run nonprofit organization MontPIRG will canvas the area to garner support and collect signatures for a petition. The petition calls on the EPA to begin cleanup of the most acutely toxic areas of the Smurfit-Stone site, collect adequate data on the full scope of contamination, and create a plan that restores the floodplain.

Cleaning up the Smurfit-Stone site and reconnecting the river with its floodplain presents a rare opportunity to get a big one right. Let's get started.

SIGN the petition. Send your comments to the EPA.

Photo: Picasa