



Anacostia Watershed Society

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COAL SPILL ON THE ANACOSTIA RIVER SHOULD BE CAUSE FOR CONCERN ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON, D.C. AREA

ANACOSTIA WATERSHED SOCIETY PLANS WATER QUALITY TESTING NEAR CSX FREIGHT TRAIN DERAILMENT SITE BY ANACOSTIA PARK.

Washington, D.C.—At approximately 3 p.m. on Friday afternoon November 9, 2007 an 89-car CSX freight train derailed on a bridge over the Anacostia River just south of RFK stadium in the District of Columbia. According to CSX spokesman Steve Flippin, five of the seven cars involved toppled off the bridge and into the Anacostia after participating in a low speed "yard movement" at the Benning rail yard. Two other freight cars remained hanging or leaning from the bridge. Recent reports indicate that brakes on the cars involved were not secured properly. Officials from CSX and several District and Federal government agencies have been on the scene since Friday investigating the cause of the accident, judging the structural integrity of the bridge, and assessing potential impacts on the local environment. The U.S. Coast Guard erected a floating boom late Friday afternoon in an effort to contain pollution from the accident. In addition to the estimated 600 tons of coal in the freight cars, the incident also caused a quantity of oil and hydraulic fluid to spill into the river.

The CSX Corporation continues to stress that all potential pollutants from the accident have been contained; however, the ongoing presence of not only coal, but coal dust in the water raises several questions. Citing the well-documented link between coal dust and Black Lung disease (pneumoconiosis or anthracosis) in humans, Anacostia Watershed Society (AWS) President Robert Boone expressed concern for the health of fish and other wildlife living downstream of the spill. Coal particles introduced into the water reduce levels of dissolved oxygen available for plants and animals living in and on the river. Pyrite—a sulfur compound found in coal—also reacts with water to create acidic conditions in the river that impair body function in fish and destroy algae and rooted aquatic plants. Boone noted that AWS staff would be collecting and testing water samples from in and around the accident site to test for any such contamination.

Clean up and recovery efforts at the accident site also pose an environmental threat to the river. Speaking at a press conference Saturday afternoon, D.C. Department of Environment officials noted that the removal of the freight cars and their cargo would disturb century-old sediment layers in the river bed. Researchers at Cornell University studying the impact of a smaller derailment and coal spill at Cayuga Inlet in Ithaca, NY, found that river channelization resulting from recovery efforts there produced long-term negative effects on local habitats and wildlife populations (Harper, M., Peckarsky, B. 2005. "Effects of pulsed and pressed disturbances on the benthic invertebrate community following a coal spill in a small stream in northeastern USA." *Hydrobiologia*, 544(1): 241-47.) Clean up options will need to be considered quickly and coordinated with care in order to ensure that the Anacostia is not damaged further.

An estimated 20,000 tons of trash and 2 billion gallons of combined sewage and storm water already enter the Anacostia River on an annual basis from sources in Maryland and the District of Columbia. In addition to trash, sewage, and toxins like the coal from Friday's accident, AWS has identified several other factors effecting levels of environmental contamination on the Anacostia, including storm water runoff, sediment from erosion, nutrient pollution, and thermal pollution.

In late 2006, the rail bridge involved in Friday's accident underwent temporary repairs to stabilize support pilings that were sinking into the riverbed. According to CSX, bids for more substantial repairs to the same bridge were being solicited this fall. Dividing the Anacostia River into two sections, the drawbridge at this location allows larger boats access to the upper river. The drawbridge will be out of service for an undetermined amount of time.

AWS will continue monitoring the impacts of the coal spill as they unfold. Results from AWS water testing will be released later this week or as they become available.

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