



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

To: Local Media
From: Western U.P. Health Department
Subject: Sturgeon River-U.S. 41 Gasoline Spill
Date: Feb. 21, 2018

Cleanup completed at Sturgeon River

CHASSELL – Cleanup and restoration operations have been completed at the site of a fuel spill at the Sturgeon River Bridge on Highway 41 south of Chassell, enabling the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) to restore traffic to its normal two lanes at noon Tuesday.

The spill occurred on Feb. 3 as the result of a four-vehicle accident. An estimated 4,000 gallons of gasoline and 1,500 gallons of diesel fuel were released onto the roadway, snow-covered bridge embankments, and frozen river below, necessitating an 18-day cleanup and restoration project involving the coordinated efforts of local, state, federal and private partners.

Local officials credited the fast actions of first responders for limiting the spread of the fuel spill and minimizing environmental impacts.

“Considering the location of the spill in an environmentally sensitive area, it was great to see such a quick and coordinated response to a complex situation,” Houghton County Emergency Manager Chris Van Arsdale said. “In addition to environmental protection, public and worker safety was a priority for all parties throughout the work.”

Response agencies included Chassell Fire Department, Houghton County Office of Emergency Measures, Bootjack Fire and Rescue, Western Upper Peninsula Health Department (WUPHD), Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), local businesses and private environmental consultants.

During the course of the project, 6,200 tons of soil affected by the spill were removed and taken to a landfill, and 9,300 gallons of fuel-impacted water were pumped and taken off-site for treatment.

Following extensive soil removal, restoration of the bridge embankment was conducted under MDOT supervision using a combination of rock, soil and heavy-duty construction fabric, and a section of new guardrail was installed on the bridge. Adjacent yard and driveway areas were also restored with topsoil, mulch, grass seed, and gravel.

The public is advised that snowmobiling will not be allowed in the immediate vicinity because an area of open water will be maintained on the north side of the bridge through spring ice melt to enable monitoring and collection of any minor fuel sheen that may occur.

A long-term environmental monitoring plan is under development to assess surface water quality in the lower Sturgeon River as well as groundwater quality. Local officials stressed the importance of protecting public health and the environment during the incident and into the future.

“Our local health department worked with the EPA, DEQ and environmental contractors to monitor air and water quality during the cleanup to advise the public and workers on matters of health and safety,” said WUPHD Health Officer Kate Beer. “It is the role of public health workers to inform the public, and advocate for their ongoing health and safety.”

Another response partner, DEQ Project Manager Amy Keranen, summed up the feelings of the project team as she reflected on the successful wrap-up of operations.

“This project has been an amazing example of federal, state, local and the private-sector partners addressing an emergency in very short order,” Keranen said. “Living in the quiet Keweenaw, we might think that things like this won’t happen around here. But this tanker spill presented an opportunity for us to see that locally we have the ability to conduct a top-notch environmental cleanup with local resources. Other than a specialized on-river crew from out of the area, all work on the project was completed by local companies and organizations from the Central and Western U.P.”

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