

Listing Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal: A No-Brainer

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In late April, 2009 CPEO's Brownfields Internet Forum hosted a lively debate on the costs and benefits of federal Superfund listing, beginning with a discussion about the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, New York. On May 11 I visited the Canal, and the following day EPA personnel briefed me on the proposed listing. I concluded that listing is such an obvious outcome that the site is a poor case study of the need to address serious and complex Brownfields as Superfund sites.

The Gowanus Canal stretches about a mile and a half through western Brooklyn, terminating at the Gowanus Creek arm of the New York Harbor. EPA explains, "Completed in 1869, the Gowanus Canal was once a major transportation route for the then separate cities of Brooklyn and New York. Manufactured gas plants, mills, tanneries, and chemical plants are among the many facilities that operated along the canal."



Visibly contaminated with a surface oily sheen, the canal's sediment contains up to 4.5% polyaromatic hydrocarbons. Polychlorinated biphenyls sample as high as 43 parts per million in the sediment. Heavy metals and volatile organic compounds are also

present, and contamination is found throughout the length of the canal. The principal pathway appears to be the potential ingestion of fish from the canal or nearby harbor.



When EPA officials scored the Canal using the Hazard Ranking System, it scored 50, well above the 28.5 required for inclusion on the Superfund National Priorities List. Furthermore, reports the *New York Times*, “Pete Grannis, the commissioner of the State Department of Environmental Conservation, said his agency had asked for the Superfund listing because the state lacked the resources to clean up the canal.”

Though the canal is fronted primarily by industrial uses, its northern reach is near existing residential neighborhoods. Its restoration would support the City’s efforts to revitalize the area. Surprisingly, even today, there are limited recreational uses. In my brief visit I spotted a couple in a speedboat and an artist painting a watercolor along its banks. The *Times* interviewed a man fishing near the Canal’s mouth.

The controversy that brought me to the shores of the Gowanus was the opposition to listing expressed with some vehemence by the city of New York. According to the *Times*, “City officials said that the listing could jeopardize more than \$500 million committed to the waterfront for two private projects involving more than 1,200 housing units.” They share the developer’s concern that Superfund listing would stigmatize the property and undermine the viability of development. Numerous individuals from the area have offered comments supporting EPA’s listing proposal, and organizations such as Riverkeeper and Friends and Residents of the Gowanus Canal are campaigning for listing as well.



I thought the Canal would be a good site to compare cleanups conducted under the voluntary, or Brownfields model against those carried out under enforcement programs such as Superfund. At many sites throughout the country, I have urged community groups to petition for listing of severely contaminated sites because the voluntary model is not sufficiently protecting public health. And others, like the New York Mayor's office, believe that listing tends to discourage the development that can clean blighted property and bring it back to life.

But during my visit to New York I learned two key facts that make that debate moot at Gowanus. First, the proposed developments front a tiny fraction of the canal. Even if development accelerated the cleanup of those areas, the rest of the canal would remain seriously polluted and would re-contaminate the cleaned portions. Second, EPA only proposes to list the canal itself, not the adjacent properties. While the canal cleanup could influence activities on land, the response on land, whether part of development or not, would continue to be managed under existing authorities.

The Gowanus Canal is visibly blighted, and it's hard to imagine how EPA's interest could make things worse. Instead, I expect that a comprehensive investigation leading to the removal of contaminated sediments will not only protect public health but improve and encourage the redevelopment of adjacent property.