

Onondaga Lake

Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Trustee Council



Fact Sheet: Onondaga Lake Natural Resource Damage Assessment

Over the past century and a half, the natural resources of Onondaga Lake and its surroundings have been affected by a range of human activities. In addition to physical changes to the Lake shoreline, the Lake, its shores, and tributaries have been contaminated with hazardous substances. While clean-up efforts continue, the Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and the Onondaga Nation are conducting a natural resource damage assessment (NRDA). The goal of the NRDA is to restore, replace, or acquire the equivalent of trust resources injured as a result of the release of hazardous substances to the environment. This Fact Sheet describes the process that the Trustees are undertaking to achieve this goal.



Onondaga Lake

Onondaga Lake is located in Onondaga County, northwest of the city of Syracuse, New York. It covers 11.9 square km, has an average depth of 10.9 m, and is surrounded by wetlands, wooded areas, urban parkland, and residential areas. The southern and western shorelines are dominated by industrial waste beds, consisting mainly of ionic wastes, many of which have been re-vegetated. The Lake drains approximately 738 square km of the larger Seneca River watershed. It has three main tributaries: Ninemile Creek, Onondaga Creek, and Ley Creek and drains to the Seneca River through a single outlet located at the northern tip of the Lake.

The Lake and its surrounding areas have traditionally supported a range of natural resources. These include diverse habitats for numerous plant and animal species, which provide opportunities for economic and recreational uses. The resources also create a special cultural and spiritual environment.



The shoreline of Onondaga Lake in the fall

The Problem

In 1881, as salt manufacturing in the region was declining, the Solvay Process Company constructed a soda ash production facility on the southwestern shore of the Lake, which expanded over time both in size and in the types of chemicals produced. The waste disposal practices of this and other industries, including the General Motors Inland Fisher Guide Facility and the Town of Salina Landfill on Ley Creek, resulted in the release of hazardous wastes, including mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), to the environment. In addition, hazardous wastes deposited in upland sites have leached into the Lake through groundwater. The Lake and several upland sites were designated as the Onondaga Lake Superfund Site and are being remediated by the responsible party, under the direction of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (as the lead agency) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. However, hazardous contaminants have caused injury to the natural resources of the Lake, which the remedial process will not fully address.

Natural Resource Restoration

The U.S. Department of the Interior, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and the Onondaga Nation are working together as natural resource Trustees to assess the full extent of injury to natural resources in and around the Lake and ultimately to identify and implement restoration projects to address these losses.

The NRDA Process

The Trustees are following regulations promulgated by the U.S. Department of the Interior for the conduct of NRDA (43 C.F.R. Part 11). The first step in this process is the development of a Damage Assessment Plan. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation produced a Damage Assessment Plan in 1996. Since publication of that Plan, the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Onondaga Nation joined the State as natural resource Trustees.

At this time, the Trustees are creating an addendum to the 1996 Damage Assessment Plan, which will define the path of the assessment going forward. This addendum will be released to the public for comment prior to finalization. Once the Damage Assessment Plan Addendum has been finalized, the Trustees anticipate undertaking a number of assessment activities, including review of available information related to natural resource injury at this site, and conducting new injury assessment studies, as necessary. Ultimately, the Trustees hope to identify an appropriate type, number, and size of restoration projects to compensate the public for injuries to natural resources caused by the release of hazardous substances. As with the planning process, the Trustees will solicit input and participation from the public at various stages in the restoration process.

Cooperative Assessment

The Trustees have entered into a cooperative agreement with Honeywell International, the responsible party. While the Trustees are ultimately responsible for NRDA activities, conducting the assessment cooperatively is expected to save time, resources, and result in more timely restoration of injured natural resources.

Additional Information

For more information on the Onondaga Lake NRDA, please contact:

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