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Public, Environment to Benefit from $20.3 Million from Two Settlements for Natural Resource Damage in St. Lawrence River Area

The federal government, the State of New York, and the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe have announced a $19.4 million settlement with Alcoa Inc. and Reynolds Metals Company for injuries to natural resources, recreational fishing, and Mohawk culture resulting from the release of hazardous substances into the St. Lawrence River environment since at least the late 1950s.

Most of this settlement, $18.5 million, will be combined with $1.8 million in restoration funds from a 2011 General Motors (GM) bankruptcy settlement, to be used for restoration of the St. Lawrence River area. In all, a total of $20.3 million is slated to go to restoration efforts.

The natural resource trustees—the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe, the U.S. Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)—solicited restoration project ideas and developed a restoration plan to address injured natural and cultural resources and address lost human uses of natural resources, such as recreational fishing.

For decades, Alcoa Inc. (Alcoa West), Reynolds Metals Company (now Alcoa East) and the former GM Central Foundry plant, located in Massena, N.Y., and adjacent to the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe lands, released hazardous substances into the St. Lawrence River environment. Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), aluminum, fluoride and cyanide adversely impacted natural resources within the surrounding environment and contaminated the Mohawk community of Akwesasne, degrading natural resources used for traditional cultural practices.

The $20.3 million in settlement funds include the following components:

- Approximately $8.4 million from the Alcoa/Reynolds settlement will go to the tribe to support traditional Mohawk cultural practices, including an apprenticeship program to promote Mohawk language and traditional teachings. A portion of those funds will also support cultural institutions, including youth outdoor education programs and horticultural programs for medicine, healing and nutrition.

- More than $10 million from the GM and Alcoa/Reynolds settlements will be spent on a variety of ecological restoration projects, including restoration and/or enhancement of wetlands, streambanks, native grasslands, bird nesting and roosting habitat, fisheries and fish habitat, and acquisition of unique habitat under threat of development. These projects may also benefit cultural practices that depend on these restored natural resources.

- Nearly $2 million will be spent by Alcoa/Reynolds to develop and upgrade two boat launches on the Raquette River and construct three new launches on the Grasse River to improve fishing and boating access to rivers in the Massena area.

Additionally, the four trustees will be reimbursed for outstanding past costs to assess impacts and damages.

The restoration projects are described in the St. Lawrence Environment Restoration Compensation and Determination Plan. The Alcoa/Reynolds Consent Decree, detailing the settlement, and restoration plan, are available online at:
http://www.srmtenv.org/index.php?spec=nrda_main
http://www.fws.gov/northeast/nyfo/ec/nrda.htm
http://www.darrp.noaa.gov/northeast/lawrence/admin.html
http://www.usdoj.gov/enrd/Consent_Decrees.html

Next month, the trustees will hold informational public meetings on the restoration plan in Akwesasne and Massena:

- April 17, 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.
  Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe Office for the Aging
  Senior's Dining Hall
  29 Business Park Road
  Akwesasne, NY 13655

- April 18, 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.
  Dar's Place Banquet Hall
  Quality Inn
  10 W Orvis St.
  Massena, NY 13662

A Federal Register notice for the St. Lawrence Environment Restoration Compensation and Determination Plan will appear shortly and a separate Federal Register notice of lodging of the Alcoa/ Reynolds Consent Decree will appear about a week later. The public can provide comments on either or both notices during their 30-day public comment periods, which commence upon publication in the Federal Register. The two federal register notices and trustee websites will provide instructions on how to submit comments and will identify the last day of each comment period.

Statements from trustees:
"One of the most important aspects of this settlement is to understand the relationship between the environment and Mohawk culture, society and our economy," said Saint Regis Mohawk Tribal Chief Randy Hart. "It's the most important relationship for any tribe, not just the Mohawks. This settlement gives us the opportunity to restore some facets of that relationship to contemporary Mohawk culture, especially in terms of the relationship between elders and younger community members."

“This settlement addresses not only natural resource damages, but harm suffered by the Mohawk Akwesasne community as well,” said DEC Commissioner Joe Martens. “Although we can’t turn back the clock, the trustees worked hard to ensure that this settlement improves environmental quality, enhances public access for recreational fishing and supports traditional Mohawk cultural practices.”

"Today's settlement will increase public access to fishing, protect wildlife, and help to restore the health and economic vitality of the St. Lawrence River and its tributaries," said New York State Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman. "It will also help the Akwesasne Mohawk community to restore cultural practices that have suffered as a result of these companies' pollution. My office will continue to hold those who damage New York's environment and threaten our economy accountable for their actions.”

“This innovative settlement will restore resources that have been essential to the Mohawk community of Akwesasne for countless years, but that suffered in the twentieth century from decades of toxic contamination that degraded natural resources used for traditional cultural practices,” said U.S. Department of Justice Environment and Natural Resources Division, Assistant Attorney General Ignacia S. Moreno. “That’s why some of the funds will support traditional Mohawk cultural and language programs, youth programs, and other efforts that support health, healing, and nutrition.”

"This settlement results from one the nation's first cooperative assessments of natural resource damages from pollution," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northeast Regional Director Wendi Weber. "This collaborative approach demonstrates that industry and wildlife and environmental officials can work together to restore natural resources harmed by chemical releases into the environment."

"The Saint Lawrence is an iconic waterway, supporting an international economy, a rich cultural history, and a diverse array of species, all of which are dependent upon a healthy environment,” said NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration Director David Westerholm. “Restoration will benefit families, businesses, and visitors alike by promoting tribal cultural practices, enhancing natural habitat, and improving public access to the waterfront.”

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