

Niagara River accord criticized by environmental groups

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Canadian Environment Minister Thomas McMillan and his U.S. counterpart have agreed on the outline of a plan to clean up the Niagara River by reducing the millions of tonnes of toxic chemicals seeping into the drinking water of populations on both sides of the border.

Their outline — which must undergo further negotiations on time-tables and methods before a final plan is developed by July, 1987 — makes no commitment to excavate several underground U.S. toxic-waste dumps that are leaking hazardous chemicals into the groundwater and the river.

Instead, it focuses on setting goals to reduce "certain toxic chemicals" entering the river from industrial sources, perhaps by 50 per cent by 1995.

About 90 per cent of the chemical pollution flowing into the river comes from the United States; about 80 per cent of it comes from the dumps, while the rest comes from industrial and municipal waste sewers.

The Washington announcement was immediately branded by major environmental organizations as a public-relations ploy with little substance.

"I think it's the biggest non-event of the year because it's not clear that we have won anything," Kai Millyard, a spokesman for Pollution Probe, said in an interview.

Sarah Miller, co-ordinator of the Canadian Environmental Law Association and a Canadian director of

Great Lakes United, a trans-border environment group, said the announcement "is in fact a step backward. . . . All we have is, maybe, some goals (to reduce pollution) in another year."

Ontario Environment Minister James Bradley, who has been under attack from Mr. McMillan for his insistence that the dumps should be excavated, said in an interview that "more work needs to be done" and Ontario will take part in the negotiations toward a final agreement.

He said yesterday's announcement is "not an agreement, but a joint press release that doesn't make any commitments to a reduction."

Ontario's goal is the "virtual elimination" of toxic substances entering the waterway, Mr. Bradley said, and "there's more work to be done so we can have a meaningful agreement that will have a chance to clean up the river." By not winning a commitment from the United States to excavate the dumps, Mr. McMillan has apparently fallen short of his own previous goal of digging up the sites and destroying the wastes.

Until very recently, Mr. McMillan has been saying that to leave the wastes in the dumps is "like putting Jello in a sieve."

Ms Miller said yesterday's announcement shows that Mr. McMillan "has backpedalled in order not to ruffle U.S.-Canadian relations at a time when free-trade negotiations are getting under way."

In Washington yesterday, the minister said excavation has not been ruled out, but U.S. officials

have health and environmental concerns about it.

Instead, he said, the emphasis for now is on extracting the chemicals which have migrated underground from the dumps and on destroying them or "sucking them back" into the dumps. These are the less costly methods, already planned by U.S. officials for at least two of the dumps.

The cleanup outline was announced in a joint statement in Washington yesterday by Mr. McMillan and Lee Thomas, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. They committed their officials to complete the details by July 1, 1987.

Mr. Thomas said the first major cleanup efforts will be at four sites in New York state: Love Canal, Hyde Park, S Area and 102nd Street.

He said that "where excavation has not been chosen as the preferred route, it is simply because it is not as effective as extraction technology in dealing with wastes that have migrated from the (waste) site into the surrounding bedrock." Excavation has not been chosen for any of the sites, but Mr. Bradley said the joint statement's mention of the possibility of excavation is "a step forward."

Mr. Millyard and Ms Miller said substantial quantities of wastes would remain in those dumps and should be extracted.

The river, which also receives wastes from municipalities and a complex of steel, petrochemical and chemical-manufacturing industries, has been subject to pollution problems from bacteria, oil and excessive levels of phosphorus, chloride,

phenol and mercury since the 1940s.

It was not clear what impact a 50 per cent reduction in industrial chemicals would have. Mr. McMillan said authorities are not sure yet what amount of chemicals is going into the river.

He said some estimates range as high as nine million tonnes entering the river daily.

The cost of reducing these pollu-

tants is also unknown, though McMillan said it would be tens of millions of dollars shared by the Canadian, U.S., Ontario and New York State Governments.

In any case, reductions in pollution would require new laws from Ontario and New York State, the jurisdictions with the major responsibility for controlling pollution.

Mr. McMillan said he is pressing

ahead with the agreement at the federal level despite differences with the Ontario Government, which he accused of combining "science and high emotion" in rhetoric on the subject.

For the third day in a row, he attacked Mr. Bradley's standards as too high, saying he is fed up with Ontario: "I'm not interested in environmental theology."