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Waterway cleanup begins in Bellingham

By John Stark
The Bellingham Herald

A 160-foot-tall crane lifted a boat, barge and drill rig into the old Georgia-Pacific wastewater lagoon Tuesday, starting the first phase of a multiyear cleanup and construction project that will turn the 30 acres into a marina.

The Port of Bellingham took over the lagoon and the rest of G-P's 137 waterfront acres in 2005 after agreeing to shoulder the costs dealing with mercury contamination on the site, in the lagoon and in the adjoining Whatcom Waterway. The Port's cleanup plan, as approved by the Washington Department of Ecology, calls for removing mercury from the most contaminated spots on land and in the waterway, while covering areas with lower mercury levels with enough clean material to protect people and sea life from contact.

The contaminated sediments inside the lagoon will be dredged out for disposal at an approved landfill site, and its immense stone breakwater will be opened to allow boat access.

The marina project alone is estimated to cost about \$40 million. Port officials say they can recoup much of the cost through moorage fees, while state environmental-cleanup grants will cover the rest.

Port Environmental Director Mike Stoner said the drill rig will be used to take core samples as deep as 75 feet, while the boat will take samples of the surface sediments inside the lagoon. The results will be used to develop detailed plans for the removal work.

Anchor Environmental is developing the plans under a \$5.1 million contract with the Port.

Lucy McInerney, site manager and environmental engineer with the state Department of Ecology, said the plans are part of the process of getting required permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies to clear the way for the actual removal of contaminants.

If the design and permitting process goes as scheduled, the actual removal of sediments could begin in 2010 but would not be completed until 2014, McInerney said.

The cleanup will be lengthy because environmental regulations allow excavation work in the bay only from August through February. It is prohibited at other times to protect migrating juvenile salmon.

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