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Sauget Beginning Use Of New Tactic

FRIDAY, MARCH 17, 1989

To Cut Chemicals In Sewage

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A process designed to reduce the flow of toxic chemicals from a sewer treatment plant in Sauget into the Mississippi River will begin Monday and is expected to cost about $650,000 a year, officials said Thursday.

The process, which involves the use of powdered carbon, will be used at the American Bottoms sewer plant in Sauget under a consent order signed by the village and Illinois and federal environmental officials.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has accused Sauget of repeated violations of federal clean-water laws. The agency has said the discharge from the plant is the most toxic to acquatic life in a six-state area.

Although the new system is designed to attack the problem, plant manager George Schillinger said, "We're not totally convinced of its effectiveness. But we think it's worth a try."

Schillinger made the comment at a news conference Thursday in Cahokia.

The consent order was entered late Wednesday by U.S. District Judge William Beatty in Alton. It requires the village to add powdered carbon to its secondary treatment process, with the aim of filtering out toxic components now going into the river. The order also requires detailed tests on the discharges into the river.

Officials of the federal EPA and its Illinois counterpart say they have no doubts of the effectiveness of the process. They also pointed out that they had been willing to seek a court order to force the village to use the process.

"If Sauget had not agreed to the decree, we were ready to ask the judge to order them to do so," said Anne Weinert, an environmental engineer with the federal EPA's regional office in Chicago.

The federal agency sued the village in May 1988. The village could face millions of dollars in fines for what authorities say is the dumping of millions of gallons of toxic waste into the river.

Weinert said the consent order would have "absolutely no effect" on the pending lawsuit.

"This is an interim remedy," Weinert said. "It's a significant first step. However, there are many, many more steps before this thing is resolved."

The American Bottoms plant, which opened in 1986, was designed to use recyclable powdered carbon as a step in the waste-treatment process. But the carbon-recycling equipment at the plant was damaged in an explosion and fire in December 1987.

The sewer plant has been cited for dumping heavy metals as well as millions of gallons of ammonia, phenols, pesticide and acid into the river. The compounds are toxic to fish as well as to humans.

Sauget officials deny that the discharge from its sewer plant into the river is toxic or that it has damaged the river.

Powdered carbon is expensive, and the cost eventually will be passed onto sewer customers in the Metro East area, although Schillinger said that there are no current plans for a rate increase.

DSW 136236