

STATE

Michigan runs out of money that was pledged to environmental cleanup

By David Eggert
Of The Associated Press

LANSING » Michigan has spent or obligated almost all of a dedicated source of funding needed to clean up and redevelop 7,000 polluted sites across the state, leaving lawmakers to question the Snyder administration on what, if any, plan there is to ask voters for permission to borrow more money.

A 1998 ballot measure authorized the state to issue \$675 million in bonds for environmental protection along with waterfront and state park improvements. The money will dry up this year, and Republican Gov. Rick Snyder is proposing to shift nearly \$15 million from another fund — one used to address 8,000 leaking underground fuel tanks — as a one-time “buffer” to continue the remediation of abandoned paper mills, foundries and other properties next year.

The proposal worries some legislators who already are upset about past raids on the tank cleanup fund, which is supported by a nearly 1-cent-a-gallon fee on gasoline and other petroleum products.

“I don’t like it,” said Sen. Mike Green, a Mayville Republican who chairs the Senate environmental budget subcommittee. He called the fund transfer a “Band-Aid” approach and, like other legislators from both parties, questioned why state officials have been slow to develop a long-term plan.

Green said he intends to craft legislation that would put another bond initiative on the ballot. It would need support from two-thirds of both the GOP-led House and Senate to get a public vote.

“That’s about the only solution we have as far as cleaning up these bad sites that are everywhere,” he said, also suggesting the possibility of shifting money from the state’s rainy day fund, which could grow to \$1 billion under Snyder’s budget plan.

Rep. Scott VanSingel, a Grant Republican and a member of the House environmental budget subcommittee, said the state ide-



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Brian Kelly with the EPA walks around the former Rock Tenn paper mill site on Helen Avenue in Otsego.

ally could annually commit other money toward environmental cleanup to avoid taking on more debt that officials estimate would cost taxpayers \$1.50 for each \$1 borrowed. But “we tend to be short-sighted,” he said, and such funding could be cut in future years.

Sites tainted with hazardous substances are in every county and half are “orphan” sites, so the state is responsible for the cleanup. The bond funds cover that work and also a small portion of cleanup at federal Superfund sites with some of the most contaminated land in the U.S.

“It’s quite important that we do establish a permanent funding source. I am in favor of doing a ballot initiative,” VanSingel said.

State Department of Environmental Quality Deputy Director Amy Epkey told lawmakers this past week that a ballot measure would require broad-based support to win approval. Major companies spent millions to build public support for the 1998 Clean Michigan initiative that was backed by then-Gov. John Engler. Other environmental bonding proposals were also OK’d in 1988 and 2002.

“At this point I don’t think we have a definite answer yet, but we are looking forward to working with stakeholders and the Legislature to continue to see what op-



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Brian Kelly with the EPA uses a flash light to shows containers of chemicals in one of the buildings in the former Rock Tenn paper mill site on Helen Avenue in Otsego.

tions may exist and what makes the most sense long term,” Epkey said.

Snyder’s 21st Century Infrastructure Commission in December recommended pursuing a new ballot proposal to ensure the environmental agency could spend \$35 million a year on cleanup for a decade. Snyder spokesman Josh Paciorek said the administration will evaluate “all funding and financing mechanisms to look at infrastructure needs comprehensively across sectors.” There is serious talk in Lansing of asking voters for approval to borrow money for both water infrastructure upgrades in the wake of Flint’s crisis and environmental protection, said James Clift, policy

director for Michigan Environmental Council. Pointing to the potential for less money for cleanup, he said state environmental officials should prioritize sites where contamination “really is the barrier of redevelopment” and leave sites with other revitalization hurdles to economic development officials.

“In the future, they’re going to have to be more targeted,” Clift said. He has questions about whether the state has been “skimping” to accumulate a balance in the leaky storage tank fund at a time when only 250 of the 8,000 sites with petroleum leaks are being tested each year to determine if they pose a risk to public health.