

Statement of Elaine Marsh, Co-Founder, Friends of The Crooked River

On June 23, 1969, the Cuyahoga barley resembled a river. In fact later that summer, Time magazine would state:

Some River! Chocolate-brown, oily, bubbling with subsurface gases, it oozes rather than flows. "Anyone who falls into the Cuyahoga does not drown," Cleveland's citizens joke grimly. "He decays". . . The Federal Water Pollution Control Administration dryly notes: "The lower Cuyahoga has no visible signs of life, not even low forms such as leeches and sludge worms that usually thrive on wastes." It is also -- literally -- a fire hazard.

August 1, 1969

This is a familiar story to nearly everyone who lives in northeast Ohio, as is the disturbing information that the June 1969 Cuyahoga fire was not its first or its worst. The river burned as early as 1868. Records from the Cleveland Fire Department show that the river burned many times. Some of the fires took lives, many took property. The 1952 fire, the picture of which is the one usually associated with 1969 fire, caused over \$1.5 million in damages.

On this 40th anniversary of the river's last incendiary experience, it is good to reflect on what caused the conditions of that infamous time and where we have come since.

I would like to start with where we have gone since the circumstances in 1969. The burning of the Cuyahoga became an emblem for the deteriorated environmental quality of the nation and ignited a movement that led to the Clean Water Act and many other environmental laws. As a result, a system of state and federal laws and enforcement procedures came into being. As importantly, the research of this system discovered new technologies.

Unlike its grave, nearly dead situation in 1969, the Cuyahoga, one of many of Ohio's come-back rivers, meets or nearly meets the standards for aquatic communities for most of its 100 mile crooked journey to Lake Erie. This dramatic turn-around in the health of the Cuyahoga River is no accident. It has been a

long and difficult voyage, one that has cost over \$1 Billion. Of the many notable heroes in this continuing effort, the Ohio EPA emerges as the champion.

When the Clean Water Act was enacted, we had little understanding of how to effectively treat water or how the living systems of fresh water worked and what we needed to do to ensure the health of these systems. Here in Ohio, the Ohio EPA's research on biocriteria and on stream structure is internationally regarded as the leading authority. Working in partnership with local governments, permittees, educational institutions and nonprofit organizations, and using both carrot and stick, Ohio EPA employs approaches that succeed in restoring the fishable, swimmable goals of the Clean Water Act.

Ohio EPA's role in clean water is so much more comprehensive than permitting waste water discharges. Their recent work on the removal and modification of dams in the middle river in Kent and Monroe Falls shows the creative assistance they can provide in design, support and funding. In addition to improving water quality, these award-winning projects have resulted in dramatic enhancement in local quality of life and recreation. Once a stagnant pool, the rapids in the City of Kent are alive with kayakers and canoeists and tourists enjoying the park. This project would never have started without the work of Ohio EPA.

Now, I would like to travel back to 1969 to examine the cause of the abysmal water quality of that day. It did not happen because people did not know about the conditions. They had eyes and noses. And they had brains to understand that the condition of the Cuyahoga River was both unsafe and undesirable.

The conditions existed because people had become accustomed to allowing water-dependant economies to control water quality and because there were insubstantial public controls. Since no one was monitoring and protecting our rivers, they slid into spiraling degradation without check.

In 1969, people made a calculated presumption that things might get better, that things might not be as bad as they seemed, that the perceived benefits that society was getting from allowing the decimation of our resources was somehow worth their squandering, that the natural systems that provide clean air and clean water could somehow restore themselves and protect themselves from human development without human assistance.

Of course this calculated presumption was lethally incorrect. And the Ohio budget process may be about to make it again. The budget proposed by the senate will strip the Cuyahoga's protection and prevent the processes in place to continue the restoration of the river, processes like additional dam removals or the correction of combined sewer overflows which spew billions of gallons of untreated human and industrial waste into the Cuyahoga each year. And it will remove the checks needed to prevent back sliding into degradation.

In 1969, clean water was not a public value. It is now. Our huge public investment in clean water must be protected. And continuing problems, like oxygen dead zones in Lake Erie and other water bodies must be solved. Without the dedicated professionals at Ohio EPA in the Division of Surface Water, our water resources are not sheltered for ourselves and our children. We cannot allow this to happen again.

June 22, 2009

Elaine Marsh, Co-Founder
Friends of The Crooked River
Peninsula, OH
330-666-4026
OHGreenway@aol.com
<http://cuyahogariver.net/>