

# River volunteers find some dirty work

A giant cleanup of the Mississippi this month will dramatically improve the river's appearance as it flows through the St. Paul area.

And like Tom Sawyer with his fence, cleanup organizers hope hundreds of volunteers will want to join in the fun.

The weeklong cleanup, which starts June 22 and is being touted as the largest in Minnesota history, will pull some unlikely trash from the river and its banks.

"There are five derelict boats we'll get out, and refrigerators stuck in the muck and thousands of tires," said organizer Anne Hunt. She is coordinating the cleanup with several local groups and Chad Pregracke, a 27-year-old dynamo who has turned his passion for the river into a full-time clean-



## Around St. Paul

Joe Kimball

up crusade.

Pregracke began his river-cleanup efforts while working as a shell diver and living on islands near his home in East Moline, Ill. He organized local cleanups and gathered sponsorships to buy equipment and extend his reach. In recent years, he has worked on the Ohio River from February to June and on the Mississippi in the summer and fall.

Three days before the St. Paul cleanup begins, Pregracke will be in Washington, D.C., to accept an award.

**ST. PAUL continues on B3**

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

### Mississippi cleanup

Chad Pregracke, a river cleanup specialist from Illinois, will lead local efforts to remove trash and junk from 43 miles of the Mississippi River between Hastings and St. Anthony Falls.

#### Volunteers wanted:

- June 22, 8:30 a.m. to noon at Jaycee Park in Hastings.
- June 24, 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. in Newport.
- June 25, 8 a.m. to noon. Volunteers will be ferried to cleanup sites on the Harriet Bishop riverboat.
- June 27, 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. in the Longfellow neighborhood of Minneapolis.
- June 29, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., from Newport to the Ford Dam.

**Also needed:** Shallow draft boats, to help ferry people to the cleanup sites.

**Sunday party:** Volunteers can attend a free Celebration of the Mississippi River at Harriet Island, from noon to 3 p.m. on June 30, with music, food and education displays.

**More information:** Call 651-312-1179.

## ST. PAUL from B1

# Mississippi River cleanup will focus on 43-mile stretch

He'll be given the prestigious national public service award in a ceremony attended by President Bush and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

The Jefferson Awards are given annually; other recipients this year are Bill and Melinda Gates, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Lilly Tartikoff, a television executive and cancer fundraiser.

On a recent rainy day, while touring littered areas of the Mississippi in a johnboat, a flat-bottomed vessel with square ends, Pregracke said that he loves his work and that sees it as a lifetime endeavor.

"If I won the lottery tomorrow, I'd use the money to buy more boats and equipment," he said.

### 43 miles to clean

For her part, Hunt, who lives on the river in a houseboat, has been traveling up and downstream for weeks, documenting the many accumulated deposits of trash and litter.

She has placed dozens of Post-it notes on her detailed river charts, which the crews will use to navigate during the cleanup.

The effort will focus on 43 miles of river between Hastings and St. Anthony Falls in Minneapolis, with many volunteers concentrating on areas downriver from St. Paul.

There are several St. Paul city parks along the river, where city workers and citizens regularly collect trash. For ex-

ample, the Friends of the Mississippi organization and the city of St. Paul held an Earth Day cleanup in April. South St. Paul, too, has regular river cleanups along its banks.

But there are pockets, even within the St. Paul city limits, where plastic bottles bob in the current, sofas lie rotting and submerged in shallow water, and pieces of old docks have collapsed into the riverbed. During major rainfalls, pop cans and bottles cast off in city streets spew with the storm water through sewer pipes directly into the river.

"Some of the stuff has been illegally dumped over the years; some of it floats down during floods. However it arrived, we want to get rid of it," Hunt said.

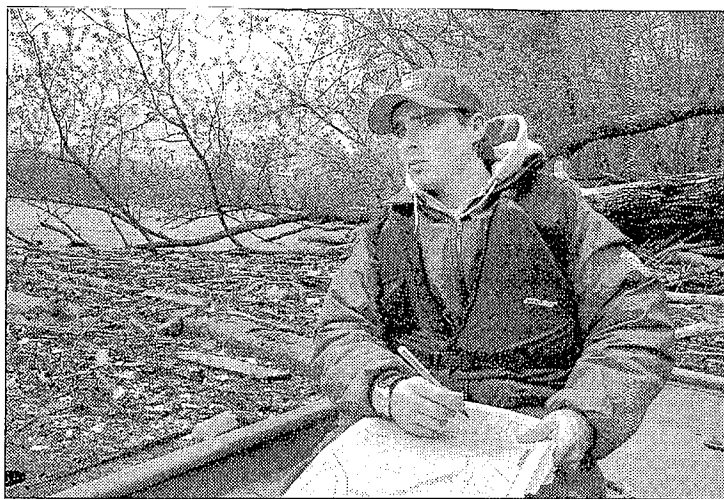
She said she found two dead calves in the water near the St. Paul Downtown airport last week.

### Launching the project

The ambitious enterprise was conceived last year, when Pregracke was in St. Paul getting a new boat for his nonprofit organization, Living Lands and Waters.

Through sponsorships, he has been able to build up the organization and assemble a small fleet of boats and barges that help in river beautification projects in several states.

Upper River Services, the local towboat and barge company, gave Pregracke a good deal on his new boat. And while he was here, he met with Hunt and with Lee Nelson of Upper River Services; plans for the lo-



David Brewster/Star Tribune

**Chad Pregracke marked potential cleanup spots on maps recently when he took a tour of the Mississippi River near St. Paul.**

cal adventure were launched.

Volunteers will be deposited in river areas not easily accessible, except by boat. They'll gather junk and trash, then ferry it back to garbage barges, where the material will be sorted and prepared for recycling.

Two major sponsors, Flint Hills Resources and Cargill Inc., are giving employees a day's pay to help with the project. Other major sponsors — the National Audubon Society, the McKnight Foundation and Upper River Services — are providing money and equipment.

The best part will be the group's ability to pick up large items such as appliances and old boats and docks, Hunt said. Some abandoned city culverts above Lock and Dam No. 1 have been inaccessible for years, but they'll be cut up and removed by floating cranes.

Volunteers will be pleasantly surprised at the June 30 wrap-up celebration, Hunt said. Two or three barges full of the junk they collected will be docked near Harriet Island during the party.

Parts of the river in Dakota

County's Nininger Township, near Hastings, haven't been subject to a formal cleanup in at least 25 years, Hunt said. Township officials even agreed to improve a road to the river to provide access for the volunteers, she said.

Although there will be some tasks suitable for families and teens on the two Saturdays, "many of the sites are for those not faint of heart," Hunt said. "They'll have to roll up their sleeves and do things like dig up tires embedded in [the] beach or help lift old refrigerators."

Nelson, who has worked on the Mississippi for more than 20 years, said more people nowadays are thinking about how they interrelate with the river and are taking steps to keep it clean and usable.

Still, he said, he's amazed at the number of plastic bottles he sees floating by.

"I'm stunned that people would just toss things out. Where have they been?"

— *Around St. Paul runs Mondays and Fridays. Joe Kimball is at 651-298-1553 or joek@startribune.com.*