

Turning the tide to clear the river

Great Falls run 'dry' for major cleanup

By **NATE SCHWEBER**

SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

PATERSON — As Willam DiPillo waded into the murky, brown Passaic River above the Great Falls on Monday morning, he figured that cleaning up the falls area could be easy — once you got rid of all that pesky water.

At 7 a.m., DiPillo, who is the head operator of the Great Falls Hydroelectric Station, plunged big wooden flashboards into the water, heightening the dam and diverting the river through the station to run the falls dry.

Soon, the twisted, brown branches of fallen trees, and charcoal-colored tires, like bloated doughnuts, began to poke through the surface of the water on the far bank.

For DiPillo, who organizes a cleanup on the banks around the Great Falls every Arbor Day, this year's project is the most ambitious yet: He wants to shut off the falls to get the trash and debris out of the riverbed.

For accuracy's sake, DiPillo admitted that the falls won't literally run dry. His goal is to lower the water level by 27 inches, to the top of the 13-foot dam that routes water through the hydroelectric station.

On Monday, he didn't receive any help from on high.

"God keeps on raining all this water into the river we're trying to lower and we keep praying, 'Please! No more water,'" DiPillo said.

By 9 a.m., Robert DeVita, River Restoration Project manager for
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■ Make the Great Falls a national park.
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KEVIN R. WEXLER/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Workers for the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission cleaning up debris at the Great Falls in Paterson on Monday after the Passaic River was diverted from the falls.

Falls: Lowering water level for massive cleanup

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the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission, arrived at the falls, ready to commence a longtime dream.

"My job is to clean up this river, and I always wanted to really go in and do a good job cleaning up its most prominent point — the Great Falls. But we could never do it because the water was too high," he said.

DeVita brought a crew of a dozen men dressed in orange hard hats, yellow rain slickers, and black rubber pants and galoshes. They set to work with axes and chain saws, hacking through the dead wood that cluttered the riverbanks. They used pulleys fastened to trees to pull bundles of dead branches out of the water.

Among the things they found were: a snow shovel, a Styrofoam airplane, enough tires to outfit a convoy of semis, enough hunks of wood to build a city of particleboard, and a rusty 6-foot iron cylinder. A worker had to puncture the cylinder with an ax to drain it of water so he could haul it out of the river.

Other workers dredged the river muck

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ROBERT DEVITA, PASSAIC VALLEY SEWERAGE COMMISSION

and the water's surface with rakes, sifting up plastic cups and bottles, beer and soda cans, plastic milk jugs and bags and packaging and potato chip bags.

The workers chucked the garbage and big hunks of wood into bins donated by JK Carting, a garbage disposal company in Paterson. They fed the twigs and sticks into a wood-chipping machine.

This is "phase one" of the Great Falls cleanup, DiPillo said. He said he wants to drop the water level all week; on Friday, there will be a massive, volunteer cleanup at the falls. More than 200 volunteers, most from Paterson public schools, and others from local businesses, will descend upon the falls and do hard labor, lugging the junk up from the sides and the bottom

of the river.

If you want to volunteer, just show up Friday morning at the Great Falls, DiPillo said.

Patricia Fee, marketing team leader for Whole Foods in Ridgewood, said her company would be on hand to donate lemonade, cookies, chips, peanut-butter bars, and fresh fruit.

"We'll be there to keep everyone hydrated while the falls run dry," she said.

DeVita said members of his team will work at the falls all week. Soon they will bring in six-wheeled, amphibious vehicles called Buffaloes — the size of golf carts — to drive into the river and haul out trash. He hopes to have a backhoe in the water on Friday, too.

Meanwhile, the river will abandon its bed and course through the hydroelectric station, which will have two of its three turbines activated and producing electricity, DiPillo said. Trout, bass, pike, catfish, carp, and eels will be diverted through a fish bypass next to the mouth of the hydroelectric plant, he added.

DiPillo said he got the idea to dry up the falls in October, when he dropped the river's level about a foot to test the strength of the dam, which was built in 1840.

The last time the falls ran completely dry was when the hydroelectric plant was first opened in 1914.

DePillo, who works for Algonquin LTD, the company that operates the city-owned plant, said there has never been a falls cleanup of this magnitude.

Next to his desk, DiPillo keeps a 2-foot-tall voodoo doll with a string of shells around its neck. He said it got stuck in the filter of the fish bypass two years ago.

"I imagine we will find weirder stuff than this," he said.

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