

Yakima Herald-Republic, Jan. 5, 2012

Crews dig up fuel-tainted soil along Little Klickitat

GOLDENDALE, Wash. -- Environmental cleanup crews began excavating soil Wednesday along the bank of the Little Klickitat River in the aftermath of a diesel fuel and oil spill, while officials are still measuring the extent of the damage.

Meanwhile, authorities downgraded their estimate of the size of the spill.

A truck that overturned early Tuesday on an icy U.S. Highway 97 spilled about 250 gallons -- down from 280 originally estimated -- of diesel fuel and oil onto the bank and possibly into the river, said Jani Gilbert, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Ecology.

Oil and fuel are toxic to plant and animal life in the river ecosystem, coating fish eggs, insect larvae and bird feathers. Even if pollutants don't reach the river, they can damage plant life that provides habitat and food. A single quart of oil has the potential to foul more than 100,000 gallons of water, according to experts.

The Little Klickitat River -- a salmon-spawning stream -- flows into the Klickitat River, which eventually pours into the Columbia River 25 miles downstream from where the accident occurred, she said.

Cleanup crews Tuesday removed the toppled truck, hauling building insulation, from where it rolled off the road, about five miles north of Goldendale.

Today, they are beginning excavation of contaminated soil, but an absorbent boom and pads will stay in place, Gilbert said. It will take several days for technicians to measure how much petroleum the containment tools collected to determine how much escaped into the river.

Wednesday, Ecology Department authorities and cleanup supervisors worked with Yakama Nation officials to pinpoint sensitive cultural sites during excavation, Gilbert said.