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EPA head kicks off volunteering effort in KC

By CHAD DAY The Kansas City Star

The head of the Environmental Protection Agency traveled to Kansas City on Monday to kick off a nationwide volunteer effort that will tackle environmental issues.

EPA administrator Lisa Jackson even lent a hand as volunteers cleaned up the area around Kaw Point, where the Kansas and Missouri rivers meet.

"Today our environment is cleaner and safer than it ever was before," Jackson said at a news conference before volunteers pulled trash from the river, including an air hockey table, tires and parts of a rusted bike.

Jackson said she was impressed with U.S. Rep. Emanuel Cleaver's proposed Green Impact Zone, which calls for spending about \$200 million in federal stimulus money to weatherize a 150-block area in Kansas City over the next two years.

Jackson said the zone could help curb urban runoff — one of the main problems facing the environment in the Kansas City area.

Jackson met with Cleaver, a Kansas City Democrat, later Monday at the Anita B. Gorman Conservation Discovery Center. There she pledged EPA support for securing funding for the green zone and discussed some of the details of weatherizing older homes in low-income neighborhoods, said Danny Rotert, Cleaver's spokesman.

The Kaw Point effort was part of United We Serve, President Barack Obama's national volunteer initiative, which lasts until Sept. 11.

Gary Wesche, a teacher and board president of the Blue River Watershed Association, helped in the cleanup along with more than 30 of his students at St. John Francis Regis School.

Meeting Jackson and seeing her take interest in the youths' activities makes what students are learning in his junior high classes more relevant, he said.

"Instead of just learning the science, they are actually conducting science," he said.

One of Wesche's students, Airiana Shaffer, 13, of Kansas City, introduced Jackson before her speech.

Airiana, who has been conducting water quality testing for two years, said it makes her feel like part of a larger movement to clean up the environment, but it's mostly just being outdoors.

"I just like the water," she said. "I like nature."

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