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United States Environmental Protection Agency
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Oral Statement Prepared for delivery before the

Committee on Environmental Conservation

New York State Assembly

Albany, New York

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Members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity. I especially want to thank Chairman Brodsky for his long-standing and steadfast leadership on environmental and public health issues. I salute your vigilance and hard work on behalf of the Hudson River and the people of the Hudson River.

The reason I am here today is to voice my deep concern about PCB contamination in the Hudson River. I want to set the record straight about this chemical's serious threat to public health and the environment.

Since we passed the Clean Water Act more than a quarter century ago, we have made great progress for our nation's waters. Rivers are no longer catching fire. We have prevented billions of pounds of toxic pollution from entering our waterways. Today, thousands of rivers and lakes are once again pulsing with life, once again sources of safe drinking water, healthy fish, vibrant economies, and community pride.

But the job is not done. We cannot rest. Pollution -- past and present -- continues to hold back too many of our country's great waters. It continues to hold back our riverside and lakeside communities. It continues to hold back the people who live along the Hudson River.

From the late 1940's until 1977 -- 30 years -- General Electric Corporation discharged more than one million pounds of the toxic waste known as PCBs into the Hudson River. Over the years, these chemicals have spread, contaminating the river from the Hudson Falls to just shy of the Statue of Liberty.

Two hundred miles of contamination. Two hundred miles of poisoned fish habitat. Two hundred miles of contamination we still live with.

GE tells us this contamination is not a problem. GE would have the people of the Hudson River believe, and I quote: "living in a PCB-laden area is not dangerous."

But the science tells us the opposite is true.

In 1996, at the direction of Congress, EPA conducted one of the most comprehensive reviews ever of PCB scientific studies to determine whether the chemicals cause cancer. EPA reviewed more than 20 published, peer-reviewed animal and human studies -- conducted by the top scientists in the field. What did the studies conclude? PCBs are a known animal carcinogen and a probable human carcinogen -- that the type of PCBs found in Hudson River fish are the most potent of all PCBs.

Fifteen of the nation's top PCB experts reviewed the EPA report, and all agreed, including a GE scientist, that the EPA scientific review fairly interpreted the body of PCB science relative to animal carcinogenicity.

But you don't have to take EPA's word for it. The International Agency for Research on Cancer declared PCBs to be a probable carcinogen. The National Toxicology Program concluded that PCBs are reasonably likely to cause cancer in humans. And the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has determined that these chemicals are a potential occupational carcinogen.

Even General Electric's own studies have shown that every PCB mixture it tested caused cancer.

And concern about PCBs goes beyond cancer. Studies show that these chemicals may have profound effects on immune systems, neurological development, and reproduction. And PCBs may pose a special health risk for infants and children.

Already, studies in animals have found altered motor skills, spontaneous abortions, and low birth weights in animals. In fact, reproductive effects in these studies continued long after exposure ended, and through multiple generations -- a reflection of the long-lasting nature of the chemical.

And just as troubling is what we don't know about PCBs. New research suggests pound for pound, nursing infants may ingest 50 times more PCBs than their mothers ingest from fish and other foods they eat. Preliminary research indicates that PCBs may disrupt human endocrine systems, potentially causing abnormal growth and development in children. And yet more research is providing further evidence of a link between PCBs and malignant melanoma, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, and other cancers.

We do not have every single answer, nor every single piece of data. But clearly, thescience has spoken: PCBs are a serious threat -- a threat to our health, a threat to our environment, a threat to our future. But GE would have us ignore all the overwhelming evidence supplied by animal studies. It would even ignore the results of its own study.

But to ignore studies on animals is to ignore the vast amount of medical research that relies on these kinds of studies -- from testing drugs to setting pesticide tolerances to testing food additives. To suggest, as GE does, that no action should be taken because some of the PCB studies may be inconclusive, flies in the face of every decision this country has made in the last quarter century to protect human health and the environment.

If we had applied GE's logic that before any action can be taken, every single

study -- not just the overwhelming majority, but every single study -- must be conclusive, we would not have been able to make the decision when we did to ban lead in gasoline and paint -- and a whole generation of American children would have suffered needlessly.

It is precisely these concerns about human and environmental health that have driven our activities in and along the Hudson. In cooperation with the state, we have required dredging and excavation of the worst-contaminated sites on the Hudson so the problem doesn't get worse. We have stabilized and restored the river banks, and ensured safe drinking water.

And we will continue our vigilance. Should we find more immediate threats to public health, we will use our full authority to take action. We will not turn away from our responsibilities, even when they require dredging.

Rest assured, when it comes to addressing imminent danger to public health, we will not hesitate to take strong and immediate action.

Unfortunately, as we work to move forward on PCB contamination, some in the U.S. Congress would hold us back. In keeping with GE's desires, some members of the U.S. House of Representatives are attempting to delay action by requiring yet another study before any action can be taken to protect public health. Remember, just three years ago, EPA concluded a congressional mandated review of the science.

This is nothing more than politics at its most cynical -- putting public health at risk to allow polluters off the hook. Which is why I have written to the congressional leadership strongly opposing these attempts to undermine our efforts to protect public health. Unfortunately, this is not the first time I have had to do so.

Time and time again, we see polluters trying to shirk their responsibility. And time and time again, this administration has stood before Congress to oppose the weakening of our toxic waste cleanup laws and to force the polluters to pay to clean up their messes, including natural resource damage -- and we will continue to do so.

We know the stakes are high for everyone concerned about PCB cleanup in the Hudson.

That is why we have taken extra steps to ensure responsible, thorough, and effective action. And that is why, quite frankly, we have required an additional 16 months before we propose a final cleanup plan -- and not because, as some have suggested, that GE has somehow influenced me or the EPA. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, I have never spoken to Jack Welch, or for that matter, with any other high-level GE official, despite my request for a meeting with Mr. Welch.

As to the additional time, let me explain why it became necessary. First, ten of those 16 months has been spent ensuring that the data is accurate.

Unfortunately, there were errors in data and thus we were forced into a tedious and time-consuming recalibration effort. Obviously, errors must be corrected. I think we would all agree that it is absolutely essential that thorough, accurate data be used in the modeling.

Second, I directed my staff to expand the scientific peer-review process. For

example, we recently assembled a panel of independent experts to review the modeling and risk assessment.

Standard scientific peer review is essential in an effort and decision of this magnitude.

Third, we have worked to ensure that we accommodate full and fair public involvement informing and engaging citizens every step of the way rather than after the fact.

Yes, all this takes time. But it is time well-spent.

A decision that is not rooted in sound, accurate, credible science -- a decision that sidesteps the citizens who must live with it -- simply prolongs the process, leads to costly litigation, and puts us back where we began a polluted river, fish unsafe to eat, fishermen out of work, little hope for a lasting solution.

That said, I am here to pledge that EPA will reach a proposed remedy decision by the end of the year 2000. We are absolutely committed to this schedule. We will not waiver from thiscommitment.

The best way to meet our goal, is to work together -- the State of New York, General Electric, and concerned citizens -- to protect the health of people along the Hudson River.

For example, we must fully address one of our greatest concerns -- the many people who still subsist on Hudson River fish and the others who simply enjoy fishing in these waters. They hook it, and they cook it, as many fishermen say.

Vans line roadways with signs that say "fresh, local fish for sale." Generous fishermen unwittingly share their catch with neighbors -- often young women and children, the two populations that are advised not to eat any fish caught in the Hudson.

We are committed to working with our partners in the New York Department of Environmental Conservation to ensure an aggressive fish advisory campaign -- more outreach and better education and posting of advisories in critical areas. In the short term, this is the single most important step we can take to protect public health and ensure that people don't eat contaminated fish.

The Hudson River is priceless to the people of New York. And it is priceless to every American -- from the art it has inspired, to its landscapes that are etched indelibly into all our imaginations. I am here today to pledge my commitment to clean up the toxic pollution that holds this river back. I pledge my commitment to return the Hudson River to the people once again healthy and whole.

Now is the time to put an end to legislative roadblocks. Now is the time to stop inaccurate and incomplete information. Now is the time for us to all work together to find solutions. EPA's latest analysis shows that more than 20 years after PCBs were last produced, the environment cannot simply heal itself. High levels of PCB contamination are still being found in the Hudson.

I call upon General Electric to work with us to provide the public with full and accurate information and help finish the job of cleaning up the Hudson River.

The people who live along the Hudson River deserve no less. The Hudson River deserves no less. The generations yet to come deserve no less.

Thank you. And now to your questions.

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