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Latest EPA Reports Show Serious Risk to Human Health and Environment from PCB Contamination in Upper Hudson River

EPA Risk Assessments Confirm Exposure to PCBs in River May Increase Cancer Risk, Other Non-Cancer Health Hazards and Threaten Fish & Wildlife

FOR RELEASE: Wednesday, August 4, 1999

(#99125) New York, N.Y. -- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) today released two major reports, which conclude that the PCB contamination in the Upper Hudson River (Hudson Falls to the Federal Dam at Troy) poses considerable risks to human health and the environment. These reports, called baseline risk assessments, characterize current and potential threats posed by the Hudson River PCBs if no cleanup is implemented or no institutional controls, such as fish consumption advisories or fishing bans, are in place. Fish advisories are currently in effect for the Hudson River.

"These reports provide important information about the risks posed by PCBs in the Hudson River," said EPA Regional Administrator Jeanne M. Fox. "Our reassessment of the Hudson River remains on track and on schedule, as we move forward with our evaluation of the best

ways to protect the environment and the people who use and enjoy this precious resource."

EPA is conducting separate risk assessments to evaluate current and future risks to human health in the Mid-Hudson River (Troy to Poughkeepsie) and to evaluate future risks to fish and wildlife in the Lower Hudson River (Troy to the Battery in New York City); these other risk assessments will be released later this year. A peer review of EPA's risk assessments will be conducted in May 2000. EPA will use the findings of the risk assessments to establish acceptable exposure levels in fish, sediments and water, and by December 2000, to evaluate cleanup alternatives for sediments in the Upper Hudson River.

In the Human Health Risk Assessment for the Upper Hudson River, EPA evaluated both cancer and non-cancer health effects in children, adolescents and adults. PCBs are probable carcinogens in humans and are known carcinogens in animals. Other long-term adverse health effects of PCBs observed in laboratory animals include a reduced ability to fight infections, low birth weights and learning problems. The report concludes that:

- Eating fish from the Upper Hudson River is the primary way for humans to be exposed to the PCBs.
- Under EPA's approach for ensuring protection of human health, there is an increased risk of one additional case of cancer for every 1,000 people eating an average of one meal a week of fish caught in the Upper Hudson. This increased cancer risk is 1000 times higher than EPA's goal for protection and ten times the highest risk level generally allowed under the federal Superfund law.

- For non-cancer health hazards, the level of exposure to PCBs from eating an average of one meal a week of fish caught from the Upper Hudson River is more than 100 times higher than EPA's level of concern.
- Under the baseline conditions, in which no cleanup is implemented or institutional controls are in place, the cancer risk and non-cancer health hazards would be above EPA's generally acceptable levels for the 40-year exposure period evaluated in the report.
- Risks from exposure to PCBs in the river through other means, such as skin contact with contaminated sediments and river water, incidental ingestion of sediments, and inhalation of PCBs in the air, were generally shown to be within or below EPA's levels of concern.

In the Ecological Risk Assessment, EPA evaluated the risks to more than 15 different fish and wildlife species with various feeding preferences, predatory levels and habitats. These species are intended to represent a range of fish and wildlife potentially exposed to PCBs in the Hudson River. PCBs are persistent in the environment and are known to bioaccumulate, becoming more concentrated and more toxic as they move up the food chain. The major findings of the report are:

- Fish in the Hudson River are at risk due to the PCBs, and larger fish that eat other fish, such as largemouth bass and striped bass, are especially at risk. The PCBs may adversely affect fish survival, growth and reproduction.

- Birds and mammals that eat fish, such as the bald eagle, belted kingfisher, great blue heron, mink and river otter, are also at risk. PCBs may adversely affect the survival and reproduction of these animals.
- PCB concentrations in water and sediments in the Hudson River generally exceed standards and criteria established to be protective of the environment.
- The risks to fish and wildlife are greatest in the Upper Hudson River (Thompson Island Pool at River Mile 189) and decrease as PCB concentrations decrease moving down river. Under baseline conditions for the Upper Hudson River, many species are expected to be at considerable risk for decades to come.

EPA will hold two meetings to discuss these findings with the public. On Wednesday, August 4, 1999, a meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. at the Albany Marriott Hotel, located at 189 Wolf Road in Albany, New York. On Thursday, August 5, 1999, a second meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. at the Sheraton Hotel at 40 Civic Center Plaza in Poughkeepsie, New York.

EPA will accept public comment on the Human Health and Ecological Risk Assessments through September 7, 1999. EPA's responses to public comments received will be released in responsiveness summaries in March 2000. ####