

David Jennings for The New York Times

The Legislature agreed on a bill to prevent New York from spending money dredging PCB-contaminated sediment from the Hudson until after a Federal review. One of the PCB sources, until 1977, was the General Electric plant in Hudson Falls.

After 15 Years, Hudson Still Has PCB's

By ALLAN R. GOLD

Nearly 15 years after New York State determined that PCB sludge in the Hudson River represented a health hazard, it has made almost no progress in cleaning up the toxic mess.

In Albany, state officials, legislators, environmental and business advocates are still arguing about how the nation's most PCB-polluted waterway should be cleaned up and who should pay for it.

Yesterday, legislators there agreed on a bill with a provision that would prevent state officials from spending any money on the state's preferred method — dredging PCB-contaminated sediment — until the Federal Government reviews the problem.

The Federal Environmental Protection Agency says it will take at least 18 months to review any state plan. Even if an E.P.A.-approved cleanup were to begin then, it would take until the end of the decade to complete, said an official of the state De-

A political deadlock leaves 40 miles of toxic river muck.

partment of Environmental Conservation.

The bill's language was written after lobbying from the General Electric Company, which dumped the PCB's into the river for 30 years. PCB's — polychlorinated biphenyls — are a group of chemicals that were long used in industry in the form of a thick, odorless liquid. State officials and environmental groups say the company fears it might eventually be stuck with the \$280 million bill for dredging 40 miles of the Hudson. G.E. favors leaving the ooze on the bottom and letting the PCB's break down into nontoxic particles over time.

The 15-year impasse over the cleanup shows how a major environmental problem — in this case one that has crippled the fishing industry in the Hudson — can persist for year after year as officials, legislators and the polluter debate blame, financial responsibility and cleanup technologies. Complicating matters, every decision along the way draws in new parties, including the town where the state plans to dump the PCB-contaminated river-bottom sediment.

"It's a failure of the body politic to come to terms with a major pollution problem," said John Mylod, executive director of the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, an environmental group that works to protect the river.

Reasons for the impasse are numerous and point to the power of business interests and politics in environmental decisions.

For instance, citizens in Fort Edward, a riverside town 190 miles north of New York

Continued on Page B4

70564

After 15-Year Wrangle, Hudson Still Has PCB's

Continued From Page B1

City, stymied the state's attempt to designate a landfill there for contaminated sediment from river dredging.

Some politicians and environmental groups say state officials showed little initiative. Others said the Reagan Administration's environmental officials deliberately stalled the cleanup effort. The E.P.A. is reviewing its decision in 1984 that no Federal Superfund money could be used to clean up the Hudson sediment.

More recently, efforts to rid the Hudson of the contaminant have been slowed by bitter disagreements over whether to dredge the waterway to remove 250,000 pounds — 125 tons — of polluted sediment or to allow it to detoxify on the river bottom.

The battle has produced an unusual alliance: the polluter, General Electric, of Fairfield, Conn., and residents of Washington County, where the landfill for the PCB sediment is contemplated.

New York expects to spend \$280 million to dredge the river between Fort Edward and the Troy dam if the E.P.A. approves. The state would seek repayment from General Electric under the Superfund program, which requires the party responsible for pollution to pay for its cleanup.

Source of the Pollution

Fort Edward, a town of 3,500 about 190 miles north of New York City, is where the contamination problem began and where it may someday end, if a PCB landfill is built by the state. At this point in its meandering journey from headwaters 100 miles north in the Adirondack Mountains, the Hudson River is about 100 yards wide.

A General Electric plant there and one in nearby Hudson Falls discharged thousands of pounds of PCB's into the Hudson from 1946 to 1977. PCB's were widely used since the 1930's as an insulator and lubricant in electrical components.

In 1973, before there was a consensus on the health hazards associated with PCB's, the Fort Edward dam, which lay below the factories, was removed, sending PCB sediments that had accumulated for years flowing downstream. In 1976, General Electric paid the state a \$3 million penalty and agreed to spend \$1 million for research. The next year, it ended PCB discharges into the river.

PCB's have been found to cause cancer in animals and to have adverse effects on animal reproduction. Although there is debate over human health effects, government officials consider PCB's a possible cause of cancer. New York State advises against eating 10 species of fish, including striped bass, taken from the Hudson below Troy. Another six are recommended for eating only once a month.

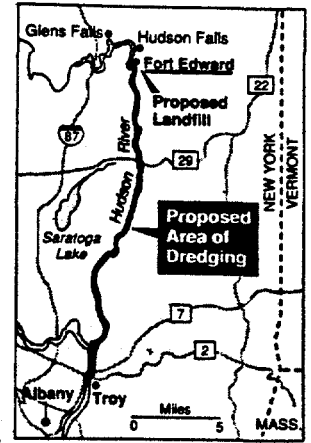
Bass Are Safe; Eating Them Isn't

The ban on commercial fishing of striped bass, a premier eating and sporting species, has had one benefit: The Hudson is now teeming with them, although they are considered unsafe to eat.

PCB levels in sediments of New York Harbor have fallen sharply since the mid-1970's, according to Dr. Richard Bopp, a research scientist at the Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory of Columbia University in Palisades, N.Y. Still, the remaining sediment contamination suggests that it will be years before PCB levels in fish decline below Federal health standards, he said in a recent interview, explaining that the toxic substance tends to concentrate at higher levels as it moves up the food chain.

In 1988, average PCB levels in striped bass in the lower Hudson were double the Federal standard — two parts per million — considered safe for human consumption. Testing in the Albany-Troy area in 1985 found levels as high as nine times above the standard.

During the 1980's, the state failed in



There has been a 15-year impasse over the PCB cleanup.

two attempts to put a PCB landfill in Washington County.

"This project is very unwelcome in our town," said Sharon Ruggi of Fort Edward, a member of Citizen Environmentalists Against Sludge Encapsulation, which fought for three years to keep any landfill off her 100-acre family farm.

Many people blame the state government.

"We've got a Department of Environmental Conservation that gives out a lot of advice on the outer atmosphere and the Brazilian rain forest — why can't they get the PCB's off the river in Glens Falls?" asked Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, a New York Democrat. He complained that the state's procrastination had cost it \$20 million he obtained in 1980 under a Federal clean-water program.

The agreement reached yesterday by legislators to stop state spending on the dredging approach was considered a blow by state environmental officials.

"The fact that General Electric can make its will felt on the state Legislature is certainly disturbing," said Langdon Marsh, executive deputy commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation.

General Electric was concerned that by the time the E.P.A. finished its as-

Few want 125 tons of dredged toxic ooze.

essment, the state would have progressed so far on the dredging and landfill plan that the Government would logically prefer it.

So the company advocated a delay in spending, said M. Peter Lanahan Jr., General Electric's regional manager of state government relations.

"We're not arguing with anyone about whether something should be done in the river," Mr. Lanahan said last week. "The argument is, what is best for the environment?"

General Electric asserts that dredging will stir up PCB's and may send more of them downstream.

In place of dredging, General Electric has proposed a process known as bioremediation. Scientists have found that some hardy bacteria in river sediment can feed on PCB's and as a result, are partially detoxifying them. The company says it may be able to test the process in the Hudson by late 1991.

New York officials say they are open to all approaches. But they say that the bioremediation technique has only been tested in a laboratory and that there is no assurance it will work in a huge, flowing river.

They also say that new dredging techniques minimize the chances of stirring up the PCB's.