

PCBs in Hudson debated

200 argue source at EPA hearing

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Poughkeepsie
Journal 9/12/91

Unidentified sources in the lower Hudson Valley may contribute up to half the Hudson's load of toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), federal officials reported Wednesday.

But environmentalists and citizens called the finding a smoke screen, diverting attention from the fact that two General Electric Co. plants upriver discharged up to 1.3 million pounds of the toxic oils into the river from 1957 to 1975.

Carrying signs that said "Make GE Pay" and "We want a PCB-free Hudson," more than 200 people packed a meeting room in the Radisson Hotel to demand that the federal Environmental Protection Agency remove thousands of pounds of PCB-contaminated sediments that remain in the river north of Troy.

Hudson River Sloop Clearwater Inc., a Poughkeepsie-based environmental group, presented a petition containing 11,531 signatures calling for a prompt PCB cleanup.

PCB contamination — a controversy that has been debated for 15 years — has made most fish species in the river unfit for consumption.

The claim that lower-Hudson sources of PCBs may equal the upriver sources was one of the principal findings of a federal reassessment of a 1984 decision not to use federal Superfund money to remove the contaminated sediments in the upper river.

"We understood that would be an unpopular finding of our report," said Doug Tomchuk, project manager of the reassessment.

"Downriver sources in no way diminish the need to remove the PCBs upriver for which GE, as the polluter, is responsible," said Donald Kent, representing the Clearwater organization.

In a statement released Wednesday, General Electric said the latest findings show that the federal government's 1984 decision was correct. "The lack of benefits from dredging, particularly in the lower river, point to natural restoration as the appropriate remedy," the statement said.