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OPINION

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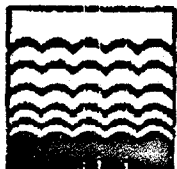
EDITORIALS

Keep GE at arms length

When it comes to cleansing the Hudson River of polychlorinated biphenyls — known to valley residents simply as PCBs — the federal government seems to suffer from a paralysis of indecision.

Now in its second year of an ever-lengthening study, the Environmental Protection Agency says it won't know until late 1993 whether to recommend a cleanup of Hudson River PCBs.

But there is one issue on which the EPA has at last acted with decisiveness, and it raises hope that the federal agency's ultimate, if belated, rendering on whether to cleanse the Hudson will be fair and impartial.



Responding to the cries of environmentalists and state officials, the EPA has removed the General Electric Co.'s chief scientist from chairmanship of a key advisory committee on the study.

Since GE discharged the PCBs into the river, it stands to pay an estimated \$280 million should a cleanup be ordered. Hence its scientist was seen, quite logically, as holding a position that could unduly influence EPA's review — in GE's favor.

GE has waged an unrelenting campaign to convince the public and the EPA that dredging PCBs from the river bottom is not necessary and might even be harmful. It is a position borne largely of wishful thinking and bottom-line science, but one that EPA should certainly consider in its review of the evidence. The other side must be given equal weight, however.

Needed: no preconceptions

In removing Dr. Daniel A. Abramowicz as chair of its science and technical committee, EPA has taken a small step in that direction. Replacing him will be Dr. William Nicholson of Mount Sinai Medical Center, who has performed epidemiological studies of PCBs and is said by EPA to have no preconceptions on a solution to the river's problem. That's good.

EPA was under considerable pressure to make this decision: In January, 20 environmental groups, fishermen, legislators and others petitioned to remove Abramowicz. In January, the state Department of Environmental Conservation concurred. And in March, the state Attorney General signed on.

But that pressure is nothing compared to the presence of GE in the review process — with its 300-page reports and impressive slide shows, its multi-million-dollar experiments and staff of scientists at the ready.

The resources of EPA don't hold a candle to GE's vast store, nor do those of the environmentalists and state agencies who favor cleaning the river.

EPA must not be intimidated by those resources. It also must not be seduced by them to take what would undoubtedly be the easier way out — to decide, ultimately, to do nothing.