Poughkeepsie Journal
OPINION

70578

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AN EDITORIAL SERIES/ PART IV

THE DAMAGE DONE
Purge the Hudson of PCBs

PCBs do hurt people

Polluter must remove poisons

In every person whose eyes scan these words, there are PCBs. These toxic chemicals are in body fat, breast milk, brain tissue.

The pollution of the Hudson River by polychlorinated biphenyls may seem a remote problem, unable to hurt people who don't eat the river's fish. But it's neither isolated nor harmless. The Hudson's pollution is part of a global environmental problem. Seals die in the Mediterranean; dolphins wash up along the Gulf of Mexico; children near the Great Lakes develop at a slower rate because their mothers ate fish. The common thread is PCBs.

PCBs are so widespread that they invade deep-water fish such as salmon and swordfish. Even eggs and poultry are regulated for PCB content. PCBs fall from the atmosphere. They leach into drinking water.

The Hudson River is one of many places poisoned by this persistent family of chemicals. Removing the river's buried PCBs must be part of a national strategy that recognizes that cleanup dollars spent now — and those must be paid out by the polluter — are health-care and fishery dollars saved later.

The PCBs that permeate the Hudson were put there over a period of 30 years by two General Electric Co. plants, located on the river about 115 miles north of Poughkeepsie. GE should be made to pay to remove the chemicals — as is possible under federal law — before more escape from river sediments to the world at large.

Serious health hazards

In the debate over removing PCBs from the river, there is no single issue as important as the effects of PCBs on animals and people. Those effects are serious and real. GE's insistence that PCBs are harmless is a blatant attempt to avoid paying $280 million to remove them.

The debate over the effects of PCBs is twofold: Do they cause cancer? Do they cause other, possibly more serious, health problems?

On cancer, the chemical's long-standing reputation as a carcinogen may have been exaggerated but it is not wholly unwarranted. PCBs are a "probable human carcinogen," in the parlance of the federal Environmental Protection Agency. That means that they have been shown to cause cancer in animals — chiefly liver cancer in rats — but that studies linking PCB exposure to cancer in people have been less conclusive. GE considers the label unfair because rat studies have focused solely on but a few of the 209 different molecular shapes that PCBs take. The company has a point.

But the company stretches the point when it contends that studies of workers exposed to PCBs show no elevated health risk. Individually, the studies are equivocal. Taken together they raise formidable questions about PCBs. "Malignant melanoma, brain cancer, pancreatic cancer, rectal cancer, liver cancer, gall bladder and biliary cancer have each been associated with PCB exposure in at least one study," said an EPA report on the Hudson River.

The federal government is now taking another look at the potential of PCBs to cause cancer. The result will likely be a new label for PCBs that better qualifies the potential of certain kinds of PCBs, mainly those with a heavy chlorine content, to cause cancer. The study certainly won't absolve PCBs of any cancer-causing potential.

Cancer not the only risk

But even if only certain forms of PCBs are labeled carcinogenic in the future, PCBs as a whole will still pose serious environmental consequences. New research is linking PCBs to other problems in humans and animals — reproductive, hormonal, developmental. A separate EPA study is assessing those risks, all of which must be considered when decision-makers weigh whether to remove PCBs buried in the Hudson.

Studies on PCBs show:

- Children of mothers who ate moderate amounts of PCB-laden fish from the Great Lakes had impaired speech, memory, behavior and coordination. Others had delayed reflexes and walked later.
- Animals exposed to lightly chlorinated PCBs — found often in the Hudson — had decreased levels of a brain chemical essential to proper functioning. This may explain effects seen in children born to mothers who ate PCB-contaminated fish.
- Birds and other wildlife that eat fish contaminated by PCBs and related chemicals have thyroid problems, sexual abnormalities, low reproductive rates and depressed immune systems. A recent scientific conference concluded: "Impacts on wildlife ... are of such a profound and insidious nature that a major research initiative on humans must be undertaken."
- Rhesus monkeys exposed to very low levels of PCBs before and during pregnancy had infants which were smaller and had developmental and behavioral problems.

How much is safe?

As a result of these studies, the General Accounting Office, an arm of Congress, listed PCBs in October 1991 among 30 chemicals that are "of high concern for their adverse reproductive and developmental effects."

The federal Food and Drug Administration says that fish can be sold in the United States if they have no more than 2 parts per million of PCBs. PCB levels in Hudson River striped bass averaged 2.79 ppm in 1990 in the lower river, the 150-mile stretch south of the Troy Dam.

But the FDA standard is far too liberal. The New York State Health Department has asked the FDA to consider lowering it in light of the rhesus monkey studies and health studies on children. State health officials say the risk of reproductive problems is 100 times greater than acceptable in women eating average amounts of fish under the current standard.

The standard is weak because it is based mainly on cancer studies, ignoring other potentially deadly effects of PCBs. "The individuals who may be most at risk — the children of people who eat contaminated fish — have not been considered," Theo Colborn, a World Wildlife Fund scientist recently told a Senate committee.

Economics was also a big factor in setting the standard. The FDA rejected a standard of 1 ppm because an additional $18 million in fish would be taken off the market. A national committee on the safety of fish concluded in 1991 that the 2 ppm standard was "substantially obsolete," and Consumers Union, a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization, has advocated lowering it to 1 ppm. The FDA should do so as soon as possible.

Change obsolete standard

The standard is of key importance to the Hudson: It is the overriding measure used to judge the estuary's health. An obsolete standard must not be the yardstick to decide the river's fate.

No one knows what harm may have been done to those who ate the river's PCB-laced fish before 1975, when most commercial fishing and sport fishing on the upper river was banned. The fishing ban, coupled with warnings that sportsmen throw back their catch or eat certain species only weekly or monthly, are all that regulators have offered to protect the public from PCBs. That's not good enough.

Nearly half the river's fishermen eat their catch at least twice weekly and many are unaware of warnings against consumption, according to a recent study by Hudson River Sloop Clearwater.

A federal report estimated the risks of eating river fish in this way: Two of every 100 people who consume upper Hudson fish over a period of 30 years would be expected to contract cancer — far above the one cancer case in a million people that regulators consider "acceptable" when assessing human exposure to chemicals. The risk of noncancer effects from such exposure, meantime, has been calculated at 51 times higher than acceptable.

When the federal Environmental Protection Agency rejected a river cleanup in 1984, it noted that the fish ban "does offer some level of protection. Clearwater's study, combined with other revelations on the effects of PCBs, shows the protection is slight.

Dredging the river of its buried PCBs, not a ban on fishing, will protect the public. And it will leave the Hudson healthier too.

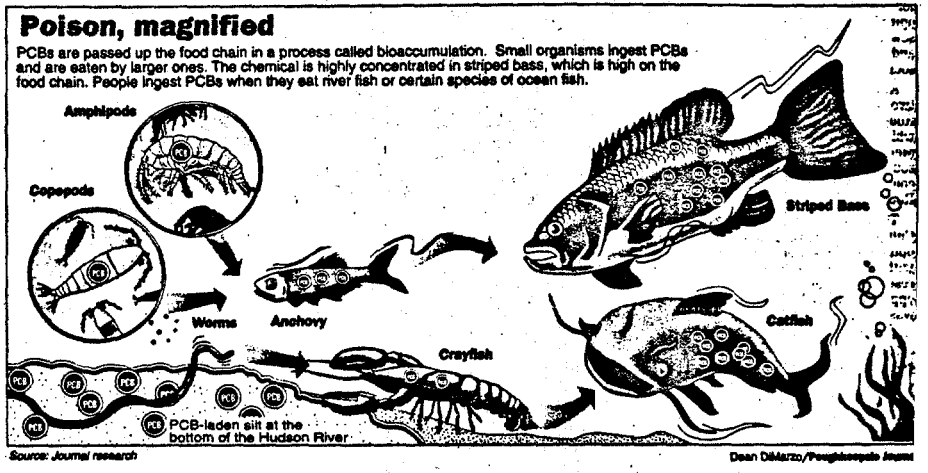
Solutions:

To address the Hudson River's PCB problem, the federal government must:

- Order a cleanup of the river's PCBs, funded by the General Electric Co.
- Dredge the chemicals from the river after a test to confirm that dredging will not disperse the PCBs and harm the river.
- Render the dredged PCBs harmless by speeding up the way nature breaks down the chemicals.
- Lower the federal limit of PCBs in fish sold for consumption to 1 part per million. The current 2 ppm standard, which is being used to judge the river's health, isn't tough enough.
- Limit GE's influence over a federal reassessment of the river's PCB problem — and finish that reassessment quickly.

Poison, magnified

PCBs are passed up the food chain in a process called bioaccumulation. Small organisms ingest PCBs and are eaten by larger ones. The chemical is highly concentrated in striped bass, which is high on the food chain. People ingest PCBs when they eat river fish or certain species of ocean fish.



Source: Journal research

Dean DiMarzo/Poughkeepsie Journal

GE used undue influence, delayed report

The General Electric Co. has delayed release of a key government report on health effects of PCBs by applying pressure at a high level of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, two EPA scientists told the Journal. That assertion indicates that GE is wielding undue influence with the blessing of federal authorities. The EPA must resist such pressure.

The report is key to a federal review of the Hudson River's PCB pollution because it concludes that PCBs are dangerous for other reasons besides their potential to cause cancer. The bigger the health risk posed by PCBs, the greater the chance that federal officials will order a cleanup of the Hudson — as they should.

According to the scientists, John Cicmanec and Kenneth Poirier, GE expressed concern about the report in a letter to high agency officials early last summer — just as EPA officials were to unveil their findings. The report, which represented a review of 68 scientific reports, had concluded that low birth weight could result in infants of mothers exposed to certain kinds of PCBs.

The study included a formula that would be used by EPA officials to estimate the public risk of exposure to these PCBs. The formula had been eagerly awaited by federal officials in New York, who are conducting a review of the Hudson, as well as by officials studying others of the nation's 185 PCB dumpsites.

High EPA officials say they were merely willing to consider any useful information. And GE says it was trying to avoid a decision based on "incomplete and inaccurate data," leading to PCB cleanups "that might not be necessary." But the scientists say the normal procedure is for interested parties to comment after the number is made public, not before — a procedure that GE finds faulty. The bottom line: GE's intervention delayed release of the formula by three months.

If the corporation can influence release of data that is pertinent to PCB dumpsites nationwide, what effect will it have over the assessment of just one of them: the Hudson? The EPA must not cave in to GE.

What you can do

This is the fourth in a series of editorials on the Hudson River's PCB contamination. The Journal will continue to comment on the PCB problem throughout a federal assessment on the river, expected to conclude in mid-1994.

To comment on a cleanup of the Hudson's PCBs, write to Constantin Sidamon-Eristoff, Regional Administrator, US EPA, 26 Federal Plaza, New York, NY 10278.

To join the PCB Coalition, an organization fighting to rid the Hudson of PCBs, call Scenic Hudson Inc. at 473-4440, or Hudson River Sloop Clearwater at 454-7673.

Address letters to General Electric Co. to M. Peter Lanahan, Government Relations Manager, 12 Sheridan Ave., Albany, NY 12207.

Opposing views on this issue are welcome.