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GE project manager Peter Lanahan points to a former water raceway in the old Allen Mill in Hudson Falls where work crews have sought to keep PCBs from oozing into the Hudson River.

GE mops up PCBs at river mill site

Cost runs \$4.5 million to stop liquid from oozing into water

BY YANCEY ROY
Staff writer

HUDSON FALLS — On the bottom floor of the old Allen Mill, not far above the rapids of Bakers Falls, a rotted wooden gate leans forward precariously, marking the source of the largest PCB leak into the Hudson River in the 1990s.

The gate, which stood for decades, was forced down probably three or four years ago by the river. No one discovered this until much later.

By then, levels of polychlorinated biphenyls

in fish, which had dropped steadily for 15 years, had soared to mid-1970s levels. The 1992 PCB report sent General Electric Co., which is responsible for the cleanup, and the state scrambling for answers.

Pinning the mess on the Allen Mill was comparatively easy. Cleaning out the 150-year-old mill, however, has been one of the knottiest problems for GE.

"Our engineers said it was one of the most interesting and complex problems they've ever worked on," said Peter Lanahan, manager of

the Hudson River remediation project for GE. Since 1993, he estimated, the company has spent \$4.5 million on the Allen Mill.

And environmentalists say the mill is only the tip of the iceberg that is the giant Hudson Falls cleanup.

PCBs have been tied to neurological and reproductive disorders and cancer. GE used PCBs as a fire retardant in capacitors in its Hudson Falls plant, which is pitched on a shale cliff overlooking the river. From 1957 to 1975, GE dumped an estimated 1.3 million
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PCBs: GE mops up PCBs near old mill site

pounds of material into the river, through, it says, accidental leaks and spills.

The human health threat comes from eating fish that have accumulated PCBs. There has been a ban on fishing in the river between Hudson Falls and Troy since 1976.

The cleanup, done under state and federal Superfund guidelines, seemed to be making progress until the PCB levels in fish tripled between 1991 and 1992. The focus then shifted from dealing with the contaminated river bottom to the soil and water beneath the GE plant.

Investigators found PCB liquid oozed down through cracks and fissures in the earth. Some found its way into water flowing into the Allen Mill. At some point the wooden gate — a roughly 20-by-20-foot structure holding back about four feet of sediment and another four feet of water — gave way, washing PCBs into the river.

"We think this is the most significant source of PCBs in the river," Lanahan said on a recent tour of the plant.

He was dressed casually in short sleeves, khaki slacks and leather work boots as he toiled the depths of the mill. Cleanup workers were also dressed casually, occasionally donning sterile white jumpsuits while walking through the lower "raceway," or channel, that once directed water into the mill. State Department of Environmental Conservation water inspectors were also touring the site.

The gray day was quiet, except for the sound of excavators across the river in Moreau, clearing land for the new Adirondack Hydroelectric plant.

Lanahan descended through a hole cut in the top of the mill, down steep stairs into the lower raceway. The place would be almost pitch-dark except for the portable lights hung from the roof.

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— Bridget Barclay
Hudson River Sloop Clearwater

"It was quite a chore. First, we had to figure out how to take all the material out," he said, looking at the rotted gate and piles of construction debris.

During the summer, the river was diverted. About 3,000 tons of debris were removed and millions of gallons of water were pumped into a temporary treatment plant on the cliff above. A cement wall was constructed to permanently block water from the lower raceway.

They thought they made a great deal of progress until, in June, workers discovered PCB ooze bubbling up from cracks in the shale floor. GE decided to grout the floor by boring holes in the cracks and filling them with cement. EnCon is taking a wait-and-see stance on the effectiveness of this measure.

Another major obstacle is the ground under the GE plant. It is riven with pipes and probably aided the flow of PCBs.

The next phase of remediation will likely focus on this ground, which EnCon suspects holds most of the contaminants.

"We're looking deeper under the plant to see if we can determine the principal conduit of material," said Walter Demick, an EnCon environmental engineer involved in the project. "The geological difficulty is the hodgepodge of fractures (vertical cracks) and faults (horizontal cracks) in the earth. What we haven't found

is a big crack in the rock that we can point to as the major conduit."

EnCon suspects that there might be one or more large fractures allowing the PCBs to flow downward, since it says the ooze is more driven by gravity than water. So far, GE has drilled about 85 feet below the surface, Demick said, and EnCon wants GE to go 40 feet deeper into the ground underneath the plant site adjacent to the Allen Mill.

Lanahan said GE has spent \$3.5 million on the separate Hudson Falls plant cleanup since 1992, installing ground water monitoring wells, washing out a nearby municipal sewer line and removing PCB sludge from old concrete basins.

GE critics say that until the company seriously attacks the underground problem and investigates the riverbed below the mill, the efforts are just Band-Aid remedies. The source of the flow into the Allen Mill is the bigger problem, they say.

"Yes, the site has been investigating and, yes, there's been some clean-up," said Bridget Barclay, environmental director for the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, the most vocal environmental group on the PCBs issue. "And there's a sense that when (EnCon) asks GE to do something, it gets done. But they shouldn't be patting themselves on the back because they are only beginning to address a huge, huge problem they created through negligence."

Clearwater believes that GE has spent more time haggling with regulators than cleaning the site. Barclay pointed to the decades of commercial fishing wiped out on the Hudson.

EnCon — also a target of Clearwater's criticism — says the good news is that contamination levels in fish decreased in the last survey. The department is meeting with the company this week to prescribe further remediation measures.

Meanwhile, EnCon continues to hold a hammer over GE's head. The agency is studying whether the leaks discovered in the 1990s violate a 1976 agreement that protected the company from liability for Hudson River PCB pollution and limited further discharge of the chemical. If GE has violated that pact, it could be forced to pay millions of dollars in fines and the state could compel a cleanup of the river itself, according to EnCon.

"I think the '76 agreement will become a bigger issue at the point where what needs to be done with the river comes up," said Ann DeBari, EnCon's deputy commissioner for environmental remediation.

Lanahan stressed that GE is not finished. Next year's step, he said, will be a waste-water treatment plant on the site to treat the contaminants pumped from the ground.

At the southern end of the upper raceway, he paused to point out a large black plastic barrier hanging over a 30-foot embankment.

"This is to give you an idea — not to say we didn't put PCBs in the river, we did — but they had over 100 users of PCBs in the Hudson Valley," he said.

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