

Keep up the fight over PCBs

EDITORIAL

The future health of the Hudson River may be buried in an arcane federal report now at the printers. It will take months to evaluate its technical findings.

But one result is clear. Toxic PCBs are still harming the Hudson. It should take no time for state and local officials to reignite the drive to get the river, New York's lifeline, cleaned up of the industrial chemicals that have polluted it for decades.

PCBs are encrusted in the river's bottom and still seeping into its water from bedrock under industrial sites along its banks. They have made much of the Hudson's fish inedible and harmed wildlife. They continue to pose a threat to people unaware of the dangers. They have robbed the Hudson of its multimillion-dollar fishing industry, ruining livelihoods and a historic tradition.

PCBs, polychlorinated biphenyls, are serious poisons. They can damage the reproductive and immune systems in wild animals and humans and may cause cancer.

How can this go on? Because there is not one concerted effort by local, state and federal officials to clean this mess up. The polluter, General

Electric, has done all it can to evade the cost of scouring the PCBs from the river. GE used PCBs for years in manufacturing electrical equipment at its plants in Hudson Falls and Fort Edwards in Washington County, before the chemicals were banned in the 1970s. That was after hundreds of tons had been dumped in the river and the ground next to it, blighting the river for generations.

Now, the most definite study ever done on the PCBs may start bringing the debate to an end. The federal Environmental Protection Agency will soon release a database report that compiles a multitude of federal, state and private GE tests on the Hudson. It should show not just how many PCBs are in the river but where they have come from.

It will show that there is still a major problem.

PCBs in river fish continue to pose a risk to human health, and fish are still picking up PCBs from both the new leaks from the bedrock and from the old "hot spots" in the river sediment, according to Douglas Tomchuk, the EPA project manager who has been working on this study for four years.

Here's what must be done next:

Keep up the pressure — The EPA, in follow-up evaluations due this spring, will decide if the river should qualify as a federal Superfund clean-up site, making GE responsible for removing the PCBs from the river bottom.

State and local officials must push federal officials to get a plan in place. Under the current federal schedule, that final plan is at least two years off.

GE, under pressure from the state over the last two years, has been trying to clean up pollution at its plant sites, removing 40 tons of PCBs from an old mill in Hudson Falls, capping other shoreline deposits, sealing open-

ings in the riverbank to try to stop leaks and building a wastewater treatment facility, set to go next month, to clean contaminated ground water.

But far more must be done, and the company will take no responsibility for the 250,000 pounds of PCBs still embedded in the river itself.

GE contends the river is cleansing itself, that PCBs in the sediment are being dechlorinated, destroyed by natural bacteria in the river.

Not so, say state scientists. Dechlorination has a limited impact and will not get those PCBs in the sediment down to a level that will make fish safe to eat.

It's time for the state to use federal law to pursue a "Natural Resource Damage Claim" against GE and force the company to assess how much it has damaged the river so it can pay for its restoration.

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paid to have 28,000 cubic yards of PCB sediments removed from the St. Lawrence River near Massena, St. Lawrence County. The dredging began this June and should finish next month. Engineers kept the PCBs from flowing down the St. Lawrence's strong current by putting up steel sheets, anchored by steel pilings, to contain the turbid water. Reynolds Metals Co. plans to do the same thing along the St. Lawrence next year.

Last month, New Bedford, Mass., celebrated the end of the 17-month clean-up of PCB hot spots in its harbor. Under the federal Superfund program, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and a local contractor dredged the contaminated sediments. They were overseen by a community forum of federal, state and local officials and citizen representatives who continue to work on how to dispose of the sediments.

Here Scenic Hudson is seeking an independent grant to study dredging technology and how it has advanced. Local foundations should support this.

Further, new technology is being developed to reduce the residue from dredging so no huge landfilling is required. Washington County residents had opposed dredging because they were afraid their farmland would be used as landfills for the contaminated material.

Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, another Poughkeepsie environmental group, has offered a report outlining ways to successfully use current technologies to separate PCBs from the removed sediments to significantly reduce the volume of contaminated material before destroying it. The answers exist.

Clean up this river. We know what should be done. We know why it should be done. We can soon know how it should be done. There simply must be the will to do it.

Reports due

The federal Environmental Protection Agency plans to release its collection of PCB data from samplings of Hudson River water, sediment and fish in what is known as its Phase 2 reports. A Phase 1 report in 1991 had determined that more data on the effects of the toxic chemicals was needed. Here's the schedule:

October 1995 — Printed database report outlining what kind of data EPA has collected from December 1991 to August 1994. It will also include data from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, General Electric, the U.S. Geological Survey and other sources.

November 1995 — Computer disks available giving the specific EPA data.

April 1996 — Data evaluation and interpretation report that should give most of the EPA's conclusions. This report was originally expected to be due in February 1996, but EPA officials now expect its delay.

July 1996 — Ecological risk assessment to fish and other species.

August 1996 — Human health risk assessment.

November 1996 — Phase 3 report will contain a feasibility study in which EPA will decide what action should be taken to address the contaminated river sediments.

March 1997 — A proposed plan outlining a remedy for the PCBs will be set and public meetings will be held to discuss it.

September 1997 — EPA will take into consideration the public commentary on its plan before issuing its final Record of Decision on what should be done at the polluted sites.

Whom to contact

Federal oversight — Contact Ann Rychlenski, community relations coordinator, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 2, 290 Broadway, 26th floor, New York, NY 10007-1866. Or call (212) 637-3672.

State oversight — Commissioner Michael D. Zagata, State Department of Environmental Conservation, 50 Wolf Rd., Albany, NY 12233-7010 or call (518) 457-5400.

PCB project information: Available at Adriance Public Library, 93 Market St., Poughkeepsie, NY 12601.

Support independent review — Scenic Hudson, Inc., the Poughkeepsie-based environmental group, has won a federal grant to help pay for independent experts to do a technical review of the Superfund report.

While Scenic Hudson has been one of the most staunch advocates for a full clean-up, it's in the agency's interest and the region's, to ensure that its review is as clean and pure as an IBM lab. This should prove a good check on the mounds of information from federal and state officials and GE itself.

Look at other success stories — Getting PCBs out of the river is not an impossible task. GE contends that dredging will simply stir up the PCBs in the sediments and send them flowing downriver to pollute more fish there. That's outdated bunk.

Two other EPA Superfund sites are being successfully cleaned up by dredging. General Motors has willingly