

The PCB War Heats Up

The ecological recovery of the Hudson River is by now a well-documented success story. What was little more than a 350-mile-long sewer stretching from the Adirondacks to Manhattan's Battery has been transformed over 30 years into a river pulsing with life.

There remains, however, one huge blot on this otherwise happy history — the polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCB's, that were discharged into the upper Hudson from two General Electric manufacturing plants in Fort Edward and Hudson Falls and that now lie on the river bottom. The compounds were banned 20 years ago, but enough escaped into the river to pose a potential cancer risk to humans who eat fish caught in the upper Hudson.

Under the Federal Superfund law, G.E. must clean the river of PCB's or find some way to neutralize them. The company has never denied its legal responsibility, but for two decades it has wrestled with state and Federal agencies over scientific questions involving the toxicity of the chemicals and the practical question of how best to purge the river. This struggle has now reached a new and more intense phase with the release last week of a report from the Federal Environmental Protection Agency, which has the authority to tell G.E. what to do. The report makes two key points, neither of them comforting to G.E.

The first point is that despite G.E.'s expensive and largely successful efforts to stop new leaks, there are still heavy concentrations of PCB's at the bottom of a huge "hot spot" called the Thompson Island Pool, a six-mile stretch of the river downstream from the plants. This stretch, the agency says, is the main source of PCB's in the freshwater Hudson. When sediments are churned up by natural forces, the PCB's move over a much wider area.

The agency's second point is that the com-

pounds have not biodegraded to any meaningful extent. For years, G.E. has argued that the natural process of dechlorination would eventually detoxify the PCB's, an argument that did much to persuade the E.P.A. to take no action when it first examined the situation in 1984. The agency now says dechlorination has caused only minimal shrinkage in the total mass of PCB's.

The report makes no attempt to quantify the risks to humans and the environment. Nor does it recommend a course of action. Both questions will be addressed in later studies. But while the E.P.A. has yet to decide whether it is feasible to remove the PCB's, G.E. may conceivably be required to dredge — an expensive outcome the company has deployed a small army of scientists and lawyers to avoid.

G.E. counterattacked the day the report appeared. It accused the agency of shoddy science and other sins, but focused most of its energy on the agency's findings about the sediments in the Thompson Island Pool. G.E. does not deny that there are plenty of PCB's in the river below the pool. But it argues that the PCB's originate not in the sediments, which it says are essentially stationary, but from fresh inflows from the area near the two G.E. plants above the pool. If true, this would dictate a strategy of "tightening the spigot" at or near those plants — a much cheaper alternative than dredging.

The E.P.A. regards this theory as improbable. Environmental groups, most vocally Scenic Hudson, see it as another smokescreen for G.E.'s endlessly resourceful environmental team. But wherever the truth lies, it is clear that the Federal Government is conducting a far more careful investigation of a potentially grave environmental problem than it did during the Reagan years. It is also clear that it has turned up the heat on G.E.