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EPA: PCBs are coming from river sediments

By David Blow
Staff Writer

GLENS FALLS — Despite General Electric Co. claims to the contrary, PCBs are getting into the Hudson River from sediments on the bottom of the river south of Fort Edward, federal environmental officials said Wednesday.

Officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency met with *The Post-Star's* editorial board Wednesday to dispel what they called "myths" being circulated by GE.

But spokesmen for GE, contacted later on

Wednesday, said PCBs in the river water south of Fort Edward are not emerging from sediments on the bottom of the river. Instead, the company stood by its claim that the PCBs are coming from a fresh source on the surface of the river bottom.

"The buried PCBs are not the source getting into the water and fish," GE spokesman David Warshaw said. "And they are not the type you can address by dredging."

The dispute over the source of PCBs in the river could be vital to GE, which legally dumped hundreds of tons of polychlorinated biphenyls into the river prior to 1977, when

the chemicals were banned. As a result of the company's dumping, a 200-mile stretch of the river south of Hudson Falls has been on the EPA's Superfund list of toxic sites since 1983.

GE has claimed that the PCBs it dumped prior to 1977 are now embedded in sediments on the bottom of the river and, therefore, pose no risk to fish or people who live along the river. The company claims any PCBs now found in the river's water are leaking into the river from the contaminated sites along the shore, such as GE's former Hudson Falls plant.

Earlier this year, concentrations of PCBs in

the Thompson Island Pool, an eight-mile stretch of the river south of Fort Edward, were found to be double the levels found in the same stretch of river in 1993. GE officials said there must be some new source of PCBs between the company's former Hudson Falls plant and the Thompson Island dam. The company announced plans to test in an effort to find this new source of contamination.

But EPA officials said Wednesday that GE won't find any "mystery source" because there isn't one.

"GE's hypothesis is that, come hell or high

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water, those PCBs aren't coming from the sediments," EPA spokesman Richard Stapleton said.

The EPA is disputing that hypothesis.

"There is a major source of PCBs, and it's coming from the sediments," said Douglas J. Tomchuk, the EPA official in charge of the Hudson River Superfund site. "They (GE officials) say they can't explain it. We say we can."

The EPA is in the process of determining what, if anything, should be done to cleanse the river of PCBs, which have been proven to cause cancer in rats. A decision is now expected in 1999, a year later than EPA's most recent goal of 1998.

But while some area residents and GE officials apparently believe the EPA is pushing a massive dredging project as a cleanup solution, the agency is far from making such a decision, Tomchuk said.

Before making a cleanup decision, the agency plans to complete studies of the human health and ecological risks posed by the river's PCB contamination, as well as a study of the feasibility of removing the contamination.

GE will be required to pay for any cleanup solution chosen by the EPA.

Tomchuk and Stapleton said the chemical makeup of the PCBs in the Thompson Island pool is different — less chlorinated — than the fresh PCBs seeping from the Hudson Falls plant.

The less-chlorinated PCBs are consistent with ones that have been in sediments for some time and could be becoming waterborne again from animal movement on the river bottom or underground springs pushing up through the sediments, Tomchuk said.

"There is no other source of PCBs downstream from Rogers Island other than what's in the Thompson Island Pool sediments," Tomchuk said.

Warshaw, the GE spokesman, said the less-chlorinated PCBs are ones that fairly recently ended up in the pool from further north and have started to dechlorinate naturally. Finding that source and eliminating it

will help the river far more than dredging the buried PCBs that aren't affecting fish or the water, he argued.

Warshaw also stressed that GE's studies have found no evidence that buried PCBs are being pushed upward by underground water or animals.

"It just isn't the case in studies we've done this summer," he said.

Tomchuk praised GE's work at the Hudson Falls plant, where the company has spent millions in an attempt to cut off the flow of fresh PCBs into the river. He also praised the company for sharing its data with EPA.

But the company and the EPA are worlds apart on the issue of the Thompson Island Pool PCBs, Tomchuk said.

Asked about possible health risks from the contamination, Tomchuk said GE conducted a study in which rats were fed PCBs in varying concentrations and varying degrees of chlorination. In all cases, females came down with liver cancer and the males developed thyroid problems, he said.

GE spokesman Mark L. Behan said Tomchuk "doesn't know anything about the study."

A summary of the study, supplied by GE, showed liver tumors developed in nearly all females and thyroid tumors developed in some male rats. But the study also showed that PCB-exposed female rats outlived some of the rats that weren't exposed, and mammary gland tumors in exposed female rats also occurred less frequently than in rats that weren't exposed, according to the summary.

"But the key finding was that the (PCB) potency potential to cause cancer was found to be four to 100 times less than previous regulations," Warshaw said. "And there is still no evidence that PCBs cause cancer in humans."

But in a 1991 preliminary health risk assessment, Tomchuk said, two of 100 people who ate PCB-laden fish once a week from the Hudson had a higher risk of cancer.

And while swimming in the Hudson is not barred by the EPA, Tomchuk said he wouldn't walk through contaminated sediments in the Thompson Island Pool because of fear of absorbing the chemicals through his skin.