

Babbitt Assails G.E. Over Delay In Ridding Hudson of Chemicals

By ANDREW C. REVKIN

GREENPORT, N.Y., Sept. 25 — The Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, speaking from a hilltop overlooking the Hudson River, assailed the General Electric Company today as a corporate giant bent on delaying the restoration of the Hudson River and weakening a Federal program for cleaning toxic sites.

Addressing an invited — and largely sympathetic — audience, Mr. Babbitt said, "As we meet here today, General Electric Corporation is leading a lobbying effort in the United States Congress to weaken and gut the very laws that mandate the restoration of this river."

His criticism of General Electric and other companies pressing in Washington for laws to limit what polluters must pay in cleanup costs was the most pointed such attack by the Clinton Administration. As Congress debates an updating of the 17-year-old group of cleanup laws known as Superfund, the corporations are intensively lobbying to restrict the amount of damages they would have to pay for past pollution.

In separate remarks, Mr. Babbitt

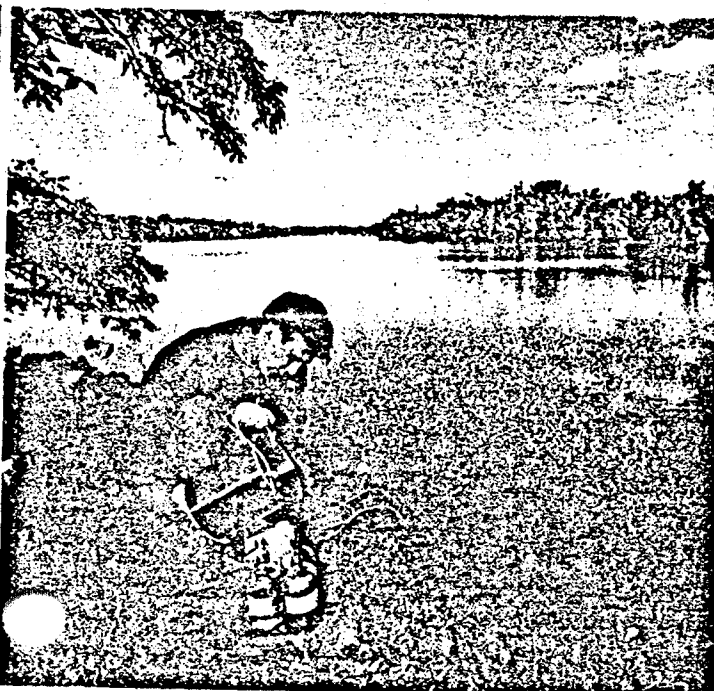
added that General Electric, which had built its business on science, was now using science to confuse, instead of clarify, the problems in the Hudson.

"The idea is to throw so much sand in the process that nothing ever gets resolved," Mr. Babbitt said.

Senior officials at General Electric, whose biggest research center is in Schenectady, just 40 miles north of here, criticized Mr. Babbitt for refusing to meet with them during his stop in New York. They added that the company had already spent more than \$130 million to stanch the flow of PCB's, a harmful industrial chemical, from its factories.

Mr. Babbitt spoke after listening to a series of presentations by commercial fishermen, Hudson Valley residents and Federal wildlife biologists who for years have pointed to problems resulting from industrial chemicals that escaped from two General Electric factories on the upper stretches of the river. The PCB problem, they said, is particularly glaring

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William A. Ayling of the engineering company O'Brien & Gere, taking water samples near Thompson Island, outside Fort Edward, N.Y. The firm is monitoring PCB levels.

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because so many of the river's other pollution problems have been reduced over the same period. The stain of PCB's, or polychlorinated biphenyls, now stretches along 200 miles of the river bottom and has ruined commercial fisheries, harmed wildlife and — according to Government scientists — poses a risk to people.

The chemicals are a family of oily compounds that were once a popular component of insulators and other electrical gear, but since 1977 have been banned as a probable cancer risk. They have also been linked in recent studies to learning problems in children who were exposed to low levels of PCB's in the womb.

Along with requiring polluters to pay the cost of cleaning a site, the Superfund laws also call for compensation to restore damaged natural resources like fisheries. In recent weeks, as Congress has debated how to update the law, a heated tug-of-war has been waged over the laws that determine damages, with environmental groups trying to keep them broad and industries, including General Electric, trying to limit their reach.

For General Electric, the stakes go far beyond the cost of cleaning the Hudson. The company is at least partly responsible for 79 Superfund sites, according to the Environmental Protection Agency — more than any other entity except the Federal Government itself.

PCB's are a substantial part of the contamination at 19 General Electric sites where cleanups are already under way. The E.P.A. is still two years away from determining how the Hudson's coating of PCB's should be cleaned — either through dredging or some other means. The scientific debate between the company and regulators about the best course for the Hudson cleanup could affect what happens at the other sites.

In recent weeks, General Electric has faced new PCB-related problems on other fronts. PCB contamination was found in soil around homes near a General Electric factory in Pittsfield, Mass., and residents learned that the company had known of the problem as early as the 1980's. And a group of clergy members from New Jersey, New York and Connecticut that owns General Electric stock began urging other shareholders to press the company to improve its environmental record.

General Electric has been arguing for months that the Hudson River PCB's will soon stop leaching into the water now that the company has found and plugged almost all new releases of the chemicals from its factories in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward, about 45 miles north of Albany.

E.P.A. officials and several environmental groups have consistently disagreed with the company's position, saying that some 40 "hot spots" in the riverbed are likely to continue shedding PCB's for decades unless they are cleaned.

Today, Stephen Ramsey, vice president for environmental programs at General Electric, sharply criticized Mr. Babbitt, calling his speech "pure politics" and saying that General Electric had every right to lobby to protect its interests.

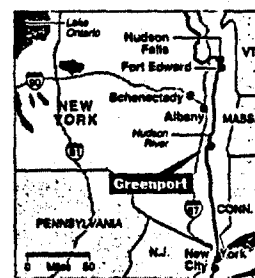
He criticized Mr. Babbitt for turning down invitations to meet with General Electric scientists during the New York visit.

Mr. Babbitt said that he declined to meet with the company because he wanted to leave the "technical and scientific issues" to Federal and New York State experts.

Mr. Ramsey contended that Federal regulations require Mr. Babbitt — as a designated trustee of the nation's natural resources — to listen to all sides, not stake out a position. "The Secretary can hardly



Bruce Babbitt, the Secretary of the Interior, called yesterday for the restoration of pollution-damaged resources like the Hudson River.



Secretary Babbitt denounced PCB pollution from G.E. factories.

Denouncing a lobby for trying to weaken U.S. pollution laws.

refuse to meet with us and say he's above the fray and then go down to the Hudson and meet with environmental groups he selects and citizens he selects, then say he's an even-handed decision maker," said Mr. Ramsey.

A White House environmental official said that in fact regulations require the Secretary of Interior to point the finger at polluters. "Under the law, Interior is a plaintiff, not the judge," said the official, Bradley M. Campbell, associate director for the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

In a related dredging issue today, General Electric criticized E.P.A. officials for failing to disclose earlier sites for dumping contaminated mud from the river bottom. At a meeting Wednesday night with General Electric, environmental groups and citizens' groups from along the river, the E.P.A. said a contractor had conducted a study of possible landfill sites for any PCB-laced Hudson Riv-

er mud.

But E.P.A. officials responded that the survey of possible sites was routine, and in no way meant that dredging was already deemed the best cleanup option. "This is just a cruel manipulation of people's fears by G.E.," said Richard Stapleton, a spokesman for the E.P.A.

The animosity between the giant company and Federal environmental officials has been intensifying for months, ever since the E.P.A. released a preliminary study of the river this spring showing that PCB's were not being naturally degraded, as General Electric had long contended would happen.

The company's scientists conducted extensive studies this summer or a six-mile stretch of the Hudson below the factories, and they say their new data show that the PCB's in the water are coming from recent releases, not the old hot spots. They have also continued to report the PCB's are not nearly as toxic as once thought, with no rise in cancers noted among large populations of former General Electric workers who were often doused in PCB's.

Today, Mr. Babbitt focused on recent work by Federal biologist showing that PCB's were showing up in high concentrations in bald eagle tree swallows and other animal. "These PCB's aren't just sinking out of sight," he said. "They're working their way through the food chain into the fish and then out of the water and into the bird life."

He said that the Superfund law which remain in effect even though three Congresses have failed so far to reauthorize them, are a critical tool for cleaning the Hudson and other tainted spots.

"The fact is, the sickness of the river today is directly traceable to the General Electric Corporation," Mr. Babbitt said, sweeping his hand along a tableau of water, mountain and sky behind him. "They have an obligation to join with us as an act partner in the complete restoration of the Hudson River and this valley