

GE's Hudson River newsletter misleads the public, critics say

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Albany Multinational company says it's based on its research and is accurate

By PAUL ZIELBAUER
Staff writer

It's called *River Watch*, it's published by the General Electric Co. and the latest edition has environmental activists and government officials shaking their heads.

The tabloid-size newsletter — subtitled "A GE Report on the Hudson River" — is now hitting mailboxes at more than 10,000 homes and offices. *River Watch* appears determined to show that the river is getting healthier, that its supply of PCBs is not dangerous to people and wildlife, and that the company has put a ton of resources into cleaning up past foulups.

And that's the problem for critics who contend GE presents its corporate spin as fact.

"I think it's pretty outrageous. They present things in a very misleading way," said Cara Lee of Poughkeepsie-based Scenic Hudson. "It is very difficult for someone who doesn't follow the issue closely to unravel truth from fantasy."

GE spokesman Mark Behan countered that the newsletter — now in its eighth year — is based on the company's research on the Hudson and is accurate about what is being done to improve the river's condition. "What we are trying to present here are factual data and analysis," he said.

The January issue takes aim at the federal Environmental Protection Agency, which recently came under fire for a plan to secretly map out potential PCB landfill sites.

EPA officials dismissed *River Watch* as a corporate brochure.

"At some point we're going to have to come out and make our clarifications on things they have said," stated Doug Tomchuk, EPA's project manager for the Hudson's PCB sites.

Despite GE's assertion of balanced reporting, *River Watch* stacks the deck on some of the articles.

For example, the current issue prominently displays a quote from Gov. George Pataki lauding the Hudson's elegance and beauty. It does not mention the quote was taken from a news release in which Pataki promised to investigate companies that polluted the river and, if necessary, make them pay to clean it up.

The newsletter also quotes Hudson Riverkeeper John Cronin, a vocal critic of the GE's handling of the PCB

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RIVER WATCH

JANUARY 1998

A GE REPORT ON THE HUDSON RIVER

PCB levels in water and fish cut in half



GE study puts spotlight on real PCB source

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GE's own study, however, says that PCBs in the sediment are not the primary source. GE's study, which was released last month, found that PCBs in the sediment are not the primary source. GE's study, which was released last month, found that PCBs in the sediment are not the primary source.

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A MAILING of the latest edition of General Electric's *River Watch* has drawn renewed concerns from some Hudson River advocates.

pollution it caused. Asked Thursday to comment on *River Watch*, Cronin panned it. "GE is trying to make itself appear as if it cares about the Hudson," he said, "and nobody's buying it."

The debate over *River Watch* isn't new. When it first came out in 1990, *River Watch* resembled an EPA publication called *River View*. After the agency complained, GE changed the look and more prominently placed its logo on the cover. Now the newsletter is chock full of photos and detailed graphics. The banner headline on the front page proclaims, "PCB levels in water and fish cut in half." The story says "PCB levels in fish in the Upper Hudson dropped 50 percent or more between 1992 and 1996." However, earlier this month, Ron Sloan of the state Department of Environmental Conservation told a public hearing that the chemicals' presence in pumpkinseed fish in some areas has increased.

"GE seems to have the answers, and those answers seem to have never varied," said EPA spokeswoman Ann

Rychlenski. "I think that the American public is smart enough to realize that GE has a very vested interest. They are financially liable for what happens on the Hudson."

Sue Gardner of Greenfield Center pulled her copy of *River Watch* from the mailbox Thursday.

"At first I thought it was something from an environmental group because I saw (the words) 'River Watch' and a photo of the river," said Gardner, 44, a teacher's assistant. Then she took a closer look. "I'm absolutely furious. It tries to make the EPA look like they're trying to do something wrong. It's nothing but propaganda."

Behan acknowledged that the newsletter presents GE's views, but he said environmental groups put their own one-sided spin on river issues.

"*River Watch* is a meaningful contribution to the debate," Behan said. "Some people are annoyed by information when it doesn't fit their preconceived notion of the facts."

LORI KANE/TIMES UNION