

The Metro Section

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Toxic Chemicals From 70's Still Pollute Hudson, Study Says

By ANDREW C. REVKIN

ALBANY, July 23 — A Federal environmental study has found that "hot spots" of PCB contamination in the upper Hudson River are not being buried in protective layers of silt, as some scientists have contended, but instead are disgorging fresh streams of the industrial PCB pollutants into the water, where they could accumulate in fish and pose a cancer threat to people who eat the fish.

As a result, senior officials with the Environmental Protection Agency said today that it might be necessary this fall to conduct accelerated cleanups of some hot spots, possibly including dredging or covering the zones where the escape of PCB's into the river is most severe.

The shift to urgent tones and talk of immediate action came as a sharp contrast

to the environmental agency's decadelong analysis to figure out how to handle the PCB's in the river bottom. And it comes at a time when studies of other pollutants have shown the river to be cleaner than it has been in decades.

The General Electric Company, which operated two factories that legally released more than a million pounds of PCB's into the river before the Government banned such discharges in 1977, has long contended that the contaminated areas are mainly dormant and that time and currents will steadily bury them.

But the new study, released at a news conference and public meeting today in Albany, concluded that most of the 36 patches of badly contaminated river bottom were being regularly scoured by currents and that those in one stretch of the river had released several tons of PCB's into the

water over a 10-year period. "The fact that these PCB's are so rapidly re-entering the river system is startling," Jeanne M. Fox, the regional administrator of the E.P.A., said in a printed statement. "Given what we know about the health risks of eating contaminated fish, this information is even more disturbing. We are evaluating the implications and will decide by the fall what steps should be taken to stem this loss."

At the news conference, Douglas J. Tomchuk, the E.P.A. official in charge of the Hudson River evaluation, said that the actions could include dredging of the worst spots or capping them with clean sand — or still doing nothing.

General Electric scientists criticized the report and the shift toward possible action. "This has more to do with politics than science," said Melvin Schweiger, who is managing the company's cleanup of its old

factory sites and its research on the PCB's in the river.

"If their theory were correct, we'd see higher PCB levels in the water and fish, when in fact the levels are significantly lower," he said. (The state's Health Department advises young women and children to eat no fish from the Hudson.)

The E.P.A. study, which analyzed several hundred cores of mud pulled from the river bottom over the last 22 years, is one in a series of recent reports by Federal scientists that conflict with General Electric's generally rosier view of the problem.

A crucial finding, said Dr. Edward A. Garvey, a consultant who conducted the study for the E.P.A., was that highly contaminated spots in a dammed pool downstream from the factories had leaked about

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a third of their contents into the river over a 10-year period, 1984 to 1994. "This says that this is a dynamic system," Dr. Garvey said. "This is not a problem you can put on a back burner and say someday we'll come back and do something about this."

Mr. Tomchuk said that a quick decision to do something about the worst spots was not unlike the decisions made during many Federal Superfund cleanups of toxic waste sites around the country, when some unexpected threat turned up.

"As you collect data at a site, you're always looking at it to see if there's any news here to protect human health or the environment," Mr. Tomchuk said. "If you uncover leaking drums, you take them away."

PCB's, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are a family of compounds once used as insulators in electrical equipment. They were banned in 1977 amid evidence they cause cancer.

Ever since 200 miles of the Hudson river bottom were deemed a Superfund toxic site 15 years ago, the Federal agency and General Electric have been locked in a scientific and public relations battle over the nature of the hazard posed by the silt, and what to do about it.

When a final decision is rendered, a decision that the E.P.A. Administrator, Carol M. Browner, has promised by the end of 1999, the company

Chemicals are being stirred up in the silt, not buried, tests find.

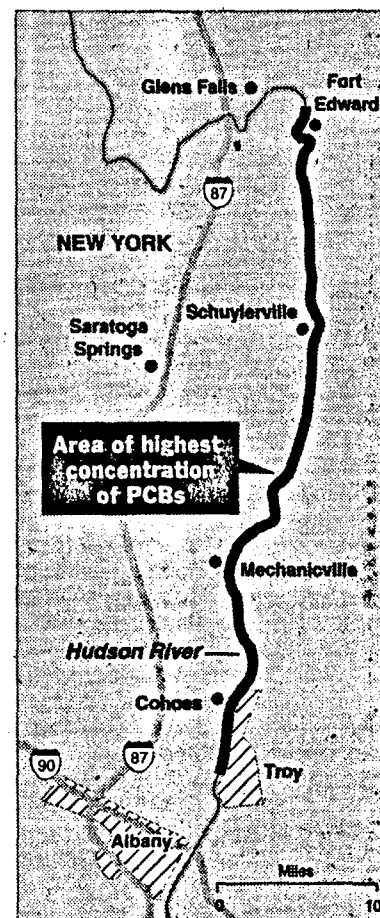
could have to pay hundreds of millions of dollars to dredge the bottom, plus additional millions in damages for resources, like fisheries, that were lost because of contamination.

Towns and politicians along the upper stretches of the river, from Troy to the old factory sites at Fort Edward and Glens Falls, have largely backed General Electric and opposed dredging of the river, saying they fear the creation of hazardous waste landfills.

Mr. Tomchuk said today that any mud from short-term dredging of hot spots would go to existing landfills that are designed for toxic materials.

Private environmental groups and some elected officials nearer New York City have been pressing the E.P.A. harder in recent months to speed the cleanup and efforts to make General Electric pay.

"Clearly G.E. is losing the scientific debate about whether PCB's are heading down the river," said Richard L. Brodsky, the chairman of the State Assembly's Environmental Conservation Committee and a Westchester Democrat. Mr. Brodsky said that the new report made clear the



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Two factories emitted hundreds of tons of PCB's before a ban in 1977.

importance of intensifying efforts to discourage people from eating fish caught in the river.

"These fish are being eaten by people, particularly poor people relying on the river for food," he said.