

70598

PCBs moving, EPA says

Colonie Sediment study from the Hudson River shows chemicals are not being entombed, as GE has maintained; company disagrees with report

By PAUL ZIELBAUER
Staff writer

PCBs are being released from sediment into the Hudson River at a "startling" rate, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said Thursday. The assessment contradicts claims from the General Electric Co. that clean silt deposits are burying the chemicals.

The EPA findings, which agency officials said could quicken a decision to dredge the Hudson River, are based on analysis of 170 sediment samples taken from the river between Fort Edward and Waterford in 1994.

Federal officials also voiced renewed concern that residents downriver who often eat Hudson River fish may be ingesting far more PCBs than previously thought.

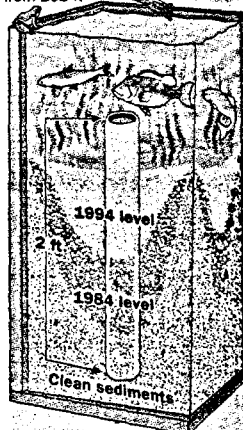
"The fact that these PCBs are so rapidly re-entering the river system is startling," Jeanne Fox, EPA's New York regional administrator, said in a written statement. "Given what we know about the health risks of eating contaminated fish, this information is even more disturbing."

Analyzing the sediment samples, EPA scientists discovered that 30 percent of the PCBs that were found in Hudson sediment in 1984 have since escaped into the water instead of breaking down or being buried, the EPA said. Moreover, most of the PCBs in the 2-foot-deep sample cores were located in the top 9 inches, not in the deeper, older strata of the river bottom.

A core sample is taken by pushing a hollow cylinder into the river bottom and removing sediment for analysis.

Layers show the amount of sediment deposited over time.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency measured PCB levels in the upper Hudson River between Fort Edward and Waterford in 1994. Results of 170 samples were compared to state Department of Environmental Conservation data from 1984.



The new information could prompt the agency to accelerate its decision whether to dredge sediment from areas of high PCB concentration.

"We can't ignore what we have learned at this point," said Doug Tomchuk, who heads EPA's Hudson River analytical team. "This gets us closer to the idea that an action might be necessary."

On Thursday, GE rejected the EPA study. In a two-page statement, it accused the agency

Please see **PCB A8** ▶

50 CENTS ★

THE
INFORMATION
SOURCE
SINCE 1856
FOR THE
CAPITAL
REGION

TIMES UNION

ALBANY, NEW YORK ■ FRIDAY, JULY 24, 1998

PCB: Feds say chemicals moving

CONTINUED FROM A1

of "moving toward a preordained, politically motivated dredging solution." The company has repeatedly noted that PCB levels in many types of fish and sediment in the Hudson have dropped over the years.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, an industrial chemical used for decades as insulation in electric transformers, have been found to cause cancer in animals. The federal government considers them a probable human carcinogen. GE legally

discharged more than a half-million pounds of the chemical from plants in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward.

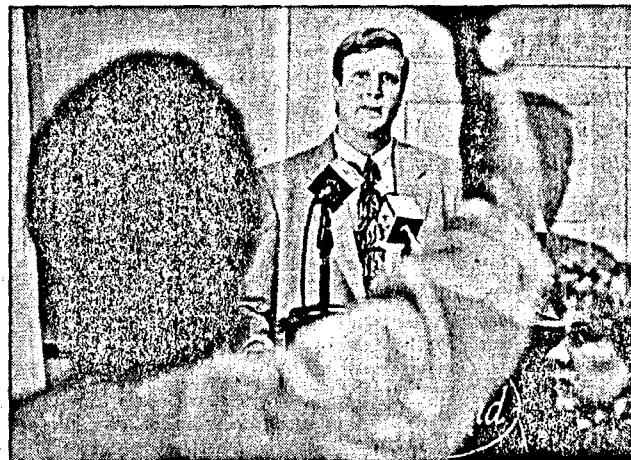
Thursday's findings were part of a complex eight-year reassessment by the EPA to determine whether dredging the Hudson to remove PCBs, which were banned by federal government in 1976. GE, which is liable for the cost of dredging should the EPA order it, has bitterly contested the agency's findings and its data-gathering methods.

The EPA announced its findings at a news conference, closed to GE officials, at the Desmond. Tomchuk emphasized that the EPA has not reached a decision on the question of dredging. But he said the primary source of the Hudson's PCBs is a large patch of sediment south of GE's now-closed plant site in Fort Edward, known as the Thompson Island Pool.

That pool is the best known of the 40 "hot spots," or areas of high PCB concentration, in the river between Fort Edward and the southern tip of Manhattan.

Fox said that the EPA will decide sometime this fall if it will move much more swiftly than previously anticipated to stem the flow of PCBs from sediment to water.

Tomchuk said if dredging occurs, the agency would only use landfills far removed from the river's upstate communities in which to deposit the silt. Many upstate farming communities worry that the EPA would deposit toxic sludge dredged from the river in that region.



STEVE JACOBS/TIMES UNION

DOUG TOMCHUK, project manager of the federal Environmental Protection Agency Hudson River PCB project, answers questions Thursday in Colonie.

The history of PCBs in the Hudson River

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are the focus of the Environmental Protection Agency's reassessment of its 1984 decision not to dredge Hudson River sediment to remove them.

What are PCBs?

An oily chemical substance used for decades as insulation in electrical transformers.

How did they get into the Hudson River?

Two General Electric Co. plants in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward legally discharged the vast majority of the river's PCBs from the mid-1940s until 1976, when the federal government banned them.

The factories closed, but PCBs continued to leak into the river from shale underneath the plants, creating "hot spots" in the river. GE has stopped most of the leakage and has over years removed tons of PCBs from both sites.

Why are PCBs bad?

There are no conclusive reports on how, and to what extent, PCBs affect people. Many scientific studies have shown PCBs to cause cancer in laboratory animals. Reports have also linked the chemicals to impaired growth and nerve disorders in people. The EPA considers the chemicals a probable carcinogen in humans and has banned commercial fishing of most

kinds of Hudson River species because of the unacceptable level of PCBs found in them.

What is the controversy?

The EPA believes PCBs probably hurt people exposed to them. GE does not. GE believes PCBs in the river are breaking down naturally. The EPA does not.

What happens next?

If the EPA decides that PCBs must be dredged from the river, it has the authority to force GE to pay the cost. The agency's decision on the matter, delayed 10 times since earlier this decade, is not due until December 2000.