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EPA says Hudson's fish pose health risk

Colonie Study says risk of cancer and other health problems rises when people eat fish from river's upper section

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Staff writer

Eating fish is the chief way people are exposed to PCBs in the upper Hudson River, and it increases the risk of cancer and other health problems, the Environmental Protection Agency said Wednesday.

Those conclusions come from an EPA study that is the first to quantify the effects of PCB contamination on human health and wildlife.

The agency's findings are the most recent in the ongoing debate over the impact of PCBs in the Hudson — and how to remove them — particularly north of the federal dam at Troy.

Regional administrator Jeanne M. Fox said the study advanced the EPA's evaluation of the Hudson and ways to protect the environment and the people who use it.

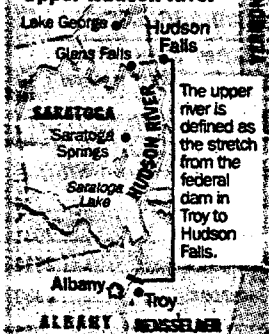
General Electric legally discharged polychlorinated biphenyls into the Hudson River from its plants in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward where the chemical was used as an electrical insulator until it was banned in the 1970s. A decision on whether to dredge the upper river — a multimillion-dollar project that GE could be forced to fund — is due in 2001.

The release of the government study came two days after U.S. Rep. John Sweeney called on the Gen-

Dangerous diet

Despite warnings not to eat fish from the upper Hudson River, some people do. Below are the EPA estimates on fish consumption. The state Health Department defines a meal as a half-pound of fish.

Upper Hudson River



- ▶ The average consumption rate of fish is six meals per year.
- ▶ The maximum consumption rate of fish is 51 meals per year.
- ▶ The cancer risk associated with average consumption is three additional cases per 100,000 people exposed over a 12-year period.
- ▶ The cancer risk associated with maximum consumption is 100 additional cases per 100,000 people exposed over a 40-year period.

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

R. VAUGHAN/R. STODDARD/TIMES UNION

al Accounting Office to evaluate EPA science. The freshman Republican from Clifton Park, who is among the most vocal opponents

Please see EPA A12 ▶

EPA: Links cancer risk to eating Hudson's fish

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to dredging, also said Monday that he doubts a link between PCBs and human illness but suspects there could be "a greater risk if PCBs are dredged from the river and we have direct contact with them."

PCBs are listed as a probable human carcinogen by the EPA because research showed they cause cancer in laboratory rats.

People face cancer risk 10 times the highest level allowed under the federal Superfund law when they eat an above-average amount of fish, said Alison Hess, a program manager for the Hudson River Reassessment Project. One hundred miles of the Hudson are contaminated with PCBs,

making it the nation's largest Superfund toxic-waste site.

Health problems other than cancer are a threat for people who eat an average amount of fish from the upper Hudson, the EPA study also concluded. One meal a week raises the chance of reproductive, development, immune system and learning problems higher than the federal "level of concern."

GE maintains that PCBs are entombed naturally by sediment, that the levels in fish have dropped by 90 percent and that dredging is not needed.

"The most effective way to reduce PCB levels in fish, which is our goal, is to continue the cleanup GE has been doing for

WHAT IS RISK ASSESSMENT?

Steps involved in risk assessment used to evaluate current and future risks at Superfund sites:

■ **HAZARD IDENTIFICATION:** Do PCBs have the potential to cause cancer? What other health effects are caused by PCBs?

■ **DOSE RESPONSE:** What amount of PCBs in the human body causes these effects?

■ **EXPOSURE ASSESSMENT:** How are people exposed to PCBs (eating, driving, breathing, skin contact) and at what levels?

■ **RISK CHARACTERIZATION:** The answers to these questions are used to calculate risk to an exposed individual of developing cancer or experiencing a non-cancer side effect.

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

20 years. And that is shutting off PCB sources into the river," said Mark Behan, a company spokesman.

He also criticized the study for extrapolating the effects and exposure to PCBs from previous research rather than actual data from the Hudson River.

Although eating all fish from the upper Hudson remains prohibited and a state Health Department study this year found widespread compliance with the regulation, many people still rely on its fish for their diet, environmental activists contend.

Depending on how much a person eats, the health risk varies. The EPA estimates that three additional cases of cancer for every 100,000 people occur when six meals are eaten every year. That risk jumps to 100 additional cases per 100,000 people when 51 meals are consumed each year.

In addition to eating fish, which store PCBs in their fatty tissues, people are exposed to the chemicals by inhaling them from the air and coming into contact with them in water and sediment. The study found these other exposure sources less hazardous.

A second EPA report released Wednesday showed that river wildlife — bald eagles, large-mouth bass, striped bass, belted kingfishers, great blue herons, minks and otters — is also at risk.

Although the EPA studies assume no cleanup measures will be taken, matching numbers to human health is likely to be used to boost the case for dredging.

"The health risks associated with PCBs make a case for cleanup," said Cara Lee of the Poughkeepsie-based Scenic Hudson environmental group.

State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, who has vowed to make sure GE takes financial responsibility for a cleanup, issued a statement Wednesday expressing confidence in the EPA. He said the reports confirmed that PCBs have "ravaged the Hudson River ecosystem."

Although PCB concentrations drop further downstream where the consumption of some fish is allowed, they still pose risks, according to the EPA. The agency said studies on the health and ecological effects on the mid- and lower Hudson River will be released later this year.