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PCB cleanup plan set

By Thom Randall, Staff Writer

The state Department of Environmental Conservation announced its decision Tuesday on how PCB pollution will be cleaned up at General Electric Co.'s Fort Edward plant site.

Environmentalists and a General Electric spokesman greeted the decision -- which is virtually unchanged from a tentative plan released last year -- with enthusiasm.

"We are pleased this cleanup plan is as aggressive as it is, and includes dredging 8,700 cubic yards of PCB-contaminated sediments in the river," said Cara Lee of Scenic Hudson, an environmental group. "This looks good to us, and it's an important part of the overall Hudson River remediation."

General Electric had proposed to cap the contaminated sediments, stretching for about 1,350 feet at the site near the east bank of the river, rather than dredge and remove them. Scenic Hudson had contended removal was a better remedy for the long term. Contamination levels of the PCB sediments ranged from 0.2 to 44,800 parts per million.

The contaminated sediment will be hauled out of the area for processing or disposal.

The plan also calls for extracting an estimated 800 tons of PCB-laden oil and groundwater contaminated with PCBs and volatile hydrocarbons from beneath the parking lot and plant.

The PCB oil will be pumped out from under the parking lot, collected and disposed at an off-site location. The contaminated groundwater around and under the plant will be collected with a series of extraction wells, and the water will have the chemicals removed at an existing on-site treatment plant. The cleaned water will be discharged into the Hudson River.

From 1946 to 1977, General Electric used PCBs -- or polychlorinated biphenyls -- as an insulator in its capacitor-making operations at its Hudson Falls and Fort Edward plants. The practice was stopped in 1977 after PCBs -- a suspected carcinogen and a substance resistant to biodegradation -- was found to be spreading through the food chain and the environment.

DEC has estimated the cost of the cleanup program at \$9.4 million.

General Electric has been voluntarily cleaning up both its Fort Edward and Hudson Falls plant sites for about 20 years, company spokesman Mark Behan said. Projects include groundwater cleansing, soil removal, dredging, pressurized groundwater containment and capping.

"GE's cleanup projects at the Hudson Falls and Fort Edward sites have been responsible for the recovery of the Hudson River, which includes a 90 percent reduction of PCB levels in fish," he said. "We share DEC's commitment to preventing PCBs from reaching the river, and we've backed up that commitment."

He said General Electric officials will continue to push for a combination of capping and

excavation of contaminated sediments near the river's east bank.

"We look forward to continuing discussions. Our alternative is more effective and less risky to the river," he said.

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