

WORLD NEWS: THE AMERICAS: Fishy business keeps Hudson polluted
CONGRESSIONAL LOBBYISTS THEY ARE DELAYING CLEAN-UP OF NEW YORK
RIVER INTO WHICH GENERAL ELECTRIC IS DISCHARGING:

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The explorers who sailed up New York's magnificent Hudson river hundreds of years ago battled poisonous snakes, impenetrable forests and treacherous currents.

Today there is a new danger - toxic chemicals. Discharged into the waters by two General Electric plants, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) have been the subject of wrangling among company and government scientists, environmentalists, lobbyists and politicians for three decades.

The Environmental Protection Agency was due to decide by the end of the year how - or whether - to clean up the mess, which it says is a particular threat to women of child-bearing years and children.

But a Hudson river clean-up is likely to be delayed by a measure now working its way through the Congress. It is one of dozens of so-called "anti-environmental riders" - measures buried by influential members in key funding bills - that would delay or reverse actions ordered by US agencies to clean American air, water and land.

The PCB rider would delay EPA action until the agency has considered a National Academy of Sciences study on sediment remediation technologies, which was ordered by Congress three years ago and is due out in September.

On the House floor, Democrats last month tried and failed to eliminate the rider. Congresswoman Nina Lowey of New York argued that it was "a delay tactic to protect those who have polluted our waterways and do not want to incur the expense of cleaning them up." Congressman James Walsh, a New York Republican, said the measure would simply allow the EPA "to get the benefit of good science and then incorporate into their plan, and make a good decision and go forward."

Providing the boost behind the various riders are companies and business associations with their own stories to tell about what "environmental extremists" are trying to force them to do. Well-connected lobbyists guide the measures through the legislative process.

GE has an extensive collection of lobbyists just for natural resources issues. It includes three Democratic and three former Republican House members, including Bob Livingston, who nearly became House speaker in 1998 but was forced to withdraw after disclosures about his personal life, and Gerald Solomon, once a key Republican legislator. It also includes Senator George Mitchell, former Democratic leader and Northern Ireland peacemaker, and two former Senate staff members; former staffers from the House commerce, environment, transportation, and merchant marine committees; and a lobbyist who worked at the Justice Department.

GE belongs to the National Sediments Coalition, a group of eight companies that generally opposes expensive dredging operations.

The EPA has been expected to order dredging but it is considering several alternatives. One is a proposal to do nothing in the hope that new sediment will deeply bury and neutralise the

contaminated materials. This natural process is already under way, and the level of PCBs in fish - while dangerously high - has already begun decreasing.

In fact, in 1984, the agency bought the argument that the best action is no action, but started reconsidering in 1989 after new techniques made environmental dredging more effective, said Alison Hess, EPA's manager of the Hudson river project.

"This is such a beautiful river that it is hard to believe the PCBs are there. But they are moving downstream now," said Ms Hess. "We have calculated that up to 1,000lb a year go over the federal dam at Troy, New York."

Some environmentalists say GE is simply trying to hold up action in the hope that George W. Bush will be elected president in November and appoint an EPA director more sympathetic to industry. Mr Cole scoffs at the notion, saying that the EPA wasted a year before ordering the study.

While GE has embarked on an extensive advertising campaign in New York opposing dredging, the EPA is caught in the middle. "We have environmental groups urging us to take action and GE advocating vociferously against it," said Ms Hess. "And there is no certainty how the NAS study will come out."

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