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NEW YORK STATE

Pataki Administration Calls for Dredging of the Hudson River to Clean Up PCB's

By RAYMOND HERNANDEZ

ALBANY, Nov. 16 — Entering one of the hottest environmental debates in the state, the administration of Gov. George E. Pataki has for the first time called for the dredging of the Hudson River to remove potentially harmful PCB's.

For years, the state has been questioning whether more should be done at the bottom of the river, where an estimated one million pounds of PCB's remain.

The decision to support dredging is a major blow to the General Electric Company, which discharged the PCB's into the river for about 30 years under permits from the state. The company could be forced to pay for a cleanup costing hundreds of millions of dollars over a decade or more.

The Pataki administration's position was contained in a letter sent by John P. Cahill, commissioner of the state's Department of Environmental Conservation, to the federal Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday. The E.P.A. is preparing to make a final

decision on a Hudson River cleanup plan by the end of this year.

The decision places the governor and the state squarely at odds with General Electric, one of the state's largest employers, at a time when the company is conducting an extensive public relations campaign against any attempt by the E.P.A. to mandate dredging.

Over the last few months, in full-page newspaper ads and television and radio commercials in upper Hudson Valley communities, the company has been saying that the river has been cleaning itself naturally, and that dredging will stir up the PCB's on the bottom and thus pose an increased threat to wildlife and people.

Environmentalists, however, say the PCB's are already leaking from contaminated sediment on the river bottom.

"G.E. is increasingly isolated in their position that the river is cleaning itself up," said Jeff Jones, a spokesman for Environmental Advocates, a lobbying group.

"PCB's are clearly a threat to human health and the river needs intervention to be cleaned up."

In his letter to the E.P.A., Mr. Cahill said that the available evidence showed that PCB's posed a "significant threat" to the public and the environment, and that more should be done. Mr. Cahill did not use the word dredging; instead, he called for "active remediation," a term widely assumed to mean dredging.

The E.P.A. had requested the state's opinion as part of its efforts to come up with a remedy for the situation in the Hudson. The agency said it would make a preliminary decision by the end of 2000 and a final decision in mid-2001. It is widely thought that if dredging is ordered, it will be performed only within a 35-mile stretch of the river between the Troy Dam near Albany and Fort Edward, just south of Adirondack Park.

PCB's, polychlorinated biphenyls, pose a cancer risk to people who eat fish or drink

The governor and the state are at odds with General Electric.

water contaminated with them, according to the E.P.A. The agency has advised that children under 15 and women of childbearing age should not eat fish from the river.

The chemicals, once used in the manufacture of electric capacitors, were released from two of G.E.'s upstate plants between 1946 and 1977. The river was declared a federal Superfund site in 1983.

The company has spent nearly \$200 million cleaning up PCB's in the river over the last 20 years, in voluntary agreements with the state and the federal agency. Today, the company said it had not seen the letter by the state and, therefore, could not comment.

Nevertheless, Stephen D. Ramsey, vice president for corporate environmental programs for G.E., said that dredging would be unwarranted and "a bad mistake." He repeated the company's position that the river had cleaned itself naturally and that dredging would cause destruction to the recovering ecosystem. "There is no real-world basis for a dredging project," he said.

But environmental groups pointed to the state's position as support for the argument they have made for years: that PCB's pose a danger to people who live along the river. The groups also said that the state's position made it more likely that the federal government would order that the contaminated sediment be dredged.

New York environmental regulators have for a decade struggled with the questions of whether contamination of the river constitutes a threat to people, and if so, what to do about it. The debate over the future of the Hudson is part of a larger dispute over what risks, if any, are posed by PCB's.