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Fight Just Beginning on Hudson Cleanup

By KIRK JOHNSON

It isn't over.

Although the half-billion-dollar plan by the federal Environmental Protection Agency to dredge the Hudson River in upstate New York was presented yesterday as the long-sought answer to the river's troubles with toxic PCB's, experts on both sides of the issue say the real showdown is only now about to begin.

The General Electric Company, which legally dumped the chemicals in the river from its factories and would be saddled with all cleanup costs under the E.P.A. plan, has vowed to fight back with every resource at its command. Environmental groups like the Sierra Club say they plan to push just as hard, with a national advertising campaign that will expose what the group's leaders say is a corporate effort led by G.E. to gut the nation's environmental protection laws. The politics could become even more volatile. Between now and June, when the

Environmental groups want the river to be a national issue.

E.P.A. is expected to issue its final order on the river after a 60-day public comment period, a new president and probably a new administrator of the E.P.A. will take office, and a new heir apparent at G.E. will be increasingly taking the reins of power.

Gov. George E. Pataki, whose administration came out last month in support of dredging, could emerge as a pivotal figure, environmentalists say, especially if he finds himself facing off with a Republican presidential administration that doesn't see the issue in the same way. "This is a lot bigger than the Hudson," said Chris Ballantyne, a Sierra Club spokesman. "It's become a na-

tional issue, and we're going to step it up."

In formally announcing the E.P.A.'s plan at a news conference in Manhattan yesterday, the agency's administrator, Carol M. Browner, also left open the possibility that the plan could be modified. She repeatedly urged G.E. to "come to the table," and suggested that the plan — despite the reams of scientific reports that she said support it — could allow for some negotiation.

"We listen to comment; we adjust depending on the comment," Ms. Browner said. "If G.E. wants to work with us in designing the components of the cleanup, how things will happen over what period of time, we would like to do that."

A spokesman for G.E. dismissed Ms. Browner's statement. "I don't think this is the day to be talking about negotiating, not until we more fully understand E.P.A.'s proposal and have more time to discuss with communities that would face the disruption

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Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Carol M. Browner, head of the E.P.A., announcing a plan to dredge the Hudson.

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E.P.A. Details Plan for Hudson, but Fight Remains

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and destruction that we think this proposal will bring to the Hudson," said Stephen D. Ramsey, the company's vice president for corporate environmental programs.

Even then, Mr. Ramsey added, talk about the Hudson is likely to go only so far. "I don't see the company agreeing to do anything that even approximates the scope of this project."

General Electric does not contest that its factories in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward polluted the Hudson with PCB's, or polychlorinated biphenyls. From 1946 until 1977, when the chemicals were banned, G.E. used PCB's to manufacture electric capacitors, and under state permits it was allowed to dump more than one million pounds of waste PCB's in the river. The chemicals were later linked to cancer in humans and to various illnesses in wildlife.

The scientific disagreement mostly centers on what those PCB's are doing now. G.E.'s own research shows that the chemicals, in the form of an amber-colored viscous oil that is heavier than water and lies on the river bottom, have been covered by layers of silt and sediment and should be left where they are.

The E.P.A. says that while most of the total chemical residue has dissipated — into the Atlantic at the riv-

er's mouth, into the fish that lived in the water and into the people who ate the fish — buried PCB's are still escaping and will remain a danger to people and wildlife until the chemicals are removed.

The agency's plan seeks to recover only the estimated 100,000 pounds that settled on the bottom in a 40-mile-long series of locations from Troy to the so-called Thompson Island pool just south of the factories.

But if geography in the river was important during the scientific investigation, political positioning will probably be the key dynamic in the days to come. Officials of groups like Hudson River Sloop Clearwater and Scenic Hudson, which have monitored and lobbied for years on behalf of the river, are already mapping out multiple chains of events that might unfold.

If Gov. George W. Bush of Texas becomes president, there will most likely be three main points on which the Hudson story will unfold, said Andy Mele, Clearwater's executive director. The first and perhaps most important will be Mr. Bush's appointment as head of the E.P.A. The second will be the new administration's ability to stand up to pressure from one of the world's largest corporations.

The third, Mr. Mele said, will center on Governor Pataki.

"My guess is that Pataki will lay low on the issue," Mr. Mele said. "If

the Bush administration tells him to shut up, he'll shut up."

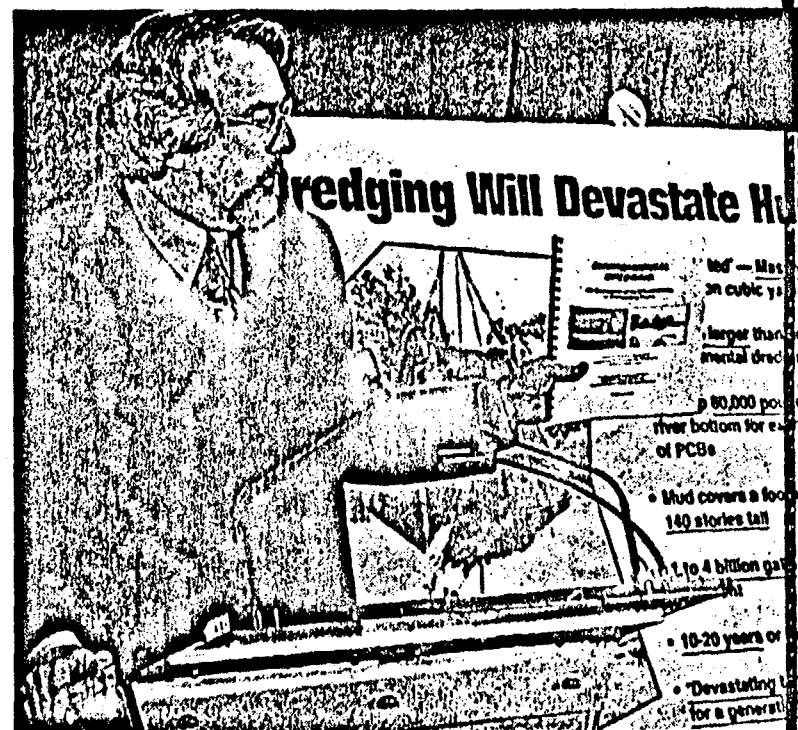
The executive director of Scenic Hudson, Ned Sullivan, disagreed, saying he thought the Hudson debate would elevate Mr. Pataki onto the national stage as never before.

"Governor Pataki has established himself as a leader on environmental issues and has come out in favor of this recommendation," Mr. Sullivan said. "That will send a very powerful and strong message that will be credible and will influence the next presidential administration."

For the moment, the Pataki administration is striking a cautious note. The governor had no public appearances yesterday, and the commissioner of the state's Department of Environmental Conservation, John P. Cahill, issued a statement saying that at the governor's direction, the agency would keep a close eye on the squabbling parties.

"D.E.C. will serve as a watchdog throughout this process to ensure that E.P.A. uses sound science at every step, protects local communities along the river during each phase and gives all interested parties a fair hearing," Mr. Cahill said.

Other experts said that while Mr. Bush has had little to say about the Hudson so far — because New York was not really contested during the presidential campaign, he was not pressured to take a stand — the degree to which environmental



In Albany, Stephen D. Ramsey, a General Electric official, gave the company's response to the plan to dredge PCB's from the Hudson.

groups can make the river a national issue could be one of the new administration's first big tests.

The central goal for the environmental groups, said Laura Haight, senior environmental associate at the New York Public Interest Research Group, will be to try to bolster E.P.A.'s courage in standing up to

strong, determined and well-financed opposition from a corporate giant, whoever becomes president.

"We've got Browner now and she's got the spine for it, but it will take a tremendous amount of public input into this process to keep reminding the E.P.A. where its spine is," Mr. Haight said.