By DINA CAPPIELLO, Staff writer
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PCB report refrains from recommendation

A long-overdue study on PCB cleanups, used by the General Electric Co. in its attempts to delay a decision on the Hudson River, has concluded that PCBs remaining in sediments "may pose long-term public health and ecosystem risks."

But the report, commissioned in 1997 by Congress at the urging of then U.S. Rep. Gerald Solomon, R-Queensbury, to evaluate the technologies available for cleaning up PCB-laden sediments, did not endorse or reject the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's $460 million dredging proposal for the Hudson River, as both sides had hoped.

The 13-page executive summary obtained by the Times Union is expected to be released officially by the National Academy of Sciences today tomorrow.

"The committee is aware that many readers expect this report to recommend (cleanup) options that ... would be most applicable to specific sites," it reads. "The committee does not believe that it is possible to state unequivocally whether dredging, capping ... or any particular option is applicable in general to PCB-contaminated sediment sites."

Nor did the committee assembled by the National Academy of Sciences -- a private, not-for-profit society that advises Congress on scientific matters -- close the door on a possible delay for the Hudson River cleanup or other Superfund sites. Instead, it implied that more work needs to be done, particularly when it comes to evaluating risks the cleanup itself poses. Two weeks ago, GE criticized the EPA dredging plan on similar grounds, saying that it did not adequately assess the risks of dredging to workers and the surrounding community.

"Risks from PCB-contaminated sediments extend beyond ... risk assessments as practiced by the EPA and other regulatory agencies," reads the report, which also recommends a framework for decision-making in addition to the one used by the EPA under federal Superfund law.

The report was initially requested by Solomon, a congressman who at the time headed the powerful House Rules committee but was known to receive contributions from GE during his term. He is now employed as a GE lobbyist.

The due date for the report was November 2000. But ever since the initial request, company lobbyists and upriver politicians, including Solomon's successor, U.S. Rep. John Sweeney, R-Clifton Park, have pushed for the decision on the Hudson River to be delayed until the EPA has had time to digest the academy's conclusions.

The latest battle was lost in October, when a provision attached to the $101 billion VA-HUD appropriations bill in the House was substantially weakened by the Senate, allowing the EPA to go ahead with the Hudson River decision before the report's release. The agency ordered on Dec. 12 that 2.65 million cubic yards of sediment, containing 100,000 pounds of PCBs, be dredged from a 36.7-mile stretch of river.

Still, in its official comment submitted for the congressional record, GE stated that the National Academy of Sciences report be considered "a major factor in proposed and final decisions by the EPA."

The company, which discharged an estimated 1.3 million pounds of PCBs into the river from its Hudson Falls and Fort Edward capacitor plants where they were used as insulators in transformers and capacitors, has long argued that more, independent science is needed along the Hudson River, even though the EPA, the state and the company have been studying the river for more than 20 years.

Both sides thought this study by the National Academy of Sciences, which sent a committee to both the Fox River and Hudson River Superfund sites, would be definitive, perhaps clearing up some of the controversy that has raged since the mid-1980s when the EPA and GE first started to duke it out. The EPA argues that dredging is needed because PCBs are still escaping from sediments into fish and other wildlife, which are then consumed by humans. GE counters that the PCBs still trickling from beneath its plant are what is contaminating fish, and all that is necessary is the control of those leaks.

The report confirmed that control of PCB sources, such as the three ounces per day that still seep out of GE's Hudson Falls plant, is essential for cleanup, but it also said that dredging and other cleanup

techniques leave some PCBs behind, remnant pollution that needs to be considered when agencies weigh the options.

The committee also recommended further research, including:

Better analysis of human health and ecological risks associated with PCB mixtures;

The impact of other contaminants present in PCB-tainted sites;

A more thorough understanding of how PCBs move in sediments;

Improvement of cleanup technologies;

Testing of innovative technologies;

The effect of continuing PCB releases in the global environment.

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