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HEADLINE: More time for response on **PCBs**

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HIGHLIGHT:

EPA grants 60-day **extension** for comments after requests by six dredging foes, including GE

BODY:

Pushing back a final decision on the dredging of the **Hudson River** by two months, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced Thursday a doubling of the time available for **public comment** on the \$ 460 million proposal.

The **extension** -- made in response to six separate requests from opponents of dredging -- marks the first time the agency's June 2001 decision on the Hudson's cleanup has been successfully delayed.

The initial end date for the 60-day comment period -- which began Dec. 12, the day the EPA released its plan to dredge 2.65 million cubic yards of **PCB**-tainted sediment -- was Feb. 16. The additional 60 days approved Thursday set the end of the comment period back to **April 17** and moved the final decision from June to August.

"We have tried to maintain the schedule we announced two years ago, but at the same time we recognize there is a lot we are asking people to review," said Mary Helen Cervantes-Gross, a spokeswoman for the EPA. The agency had granted an automatic 30-day **extension** on the first **public comment** period, which is only required to be 30 days by law, Cervantes-Gross said.

The General Electric Co., which submitted one of the requests for an **extension**, said the extra time will allow a thorough review of the 4,000-page plan released in mid-December and perhaps buy enough time for the full National Academy of Sciences report on dredging to be completed. An executive summary of that report was released Jan. 5.

"Given the importance of this issue and its complexity, the EPA has made the appropriate decision," said Mark Behan, a spokesman for GE.

The company, which could be forced to pay the \$ 460 million bill for its three decades of toxic discharges into the river, would not comment on whether it would continue its multimillion-dollar advertising campaign urging people to express their opinions about the proposed cleanup plan for the river.

Advocates of dredging the river criticized the EPA's decision Thursday, saying it had more to do with politics than **public comment**. On Wednesday, Christine Todd Whitman, President-elect George W. Bush's choice to head the EPA, kept mum when questioned about dredging by New York's newly-elected Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton.

"GE intends to use this delay to pressure the Bush administration," said Andre Mele, executive director of **Hudson River Sloop Clearwater**.

But not all in support of dredging saw politics as the motive. Others minimized what effect two months would have on a decision that the Bush administration would be making regardless of whether it happened in June or August. "In all probability, it's probably an honest attempt to respond to a situation that has generated a lot of **public comment**," said U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-Saugerties, who in the past has weakened measures pushed by GE lobbyists to postpone the EPA's decision.

The other five parties who requested **extensions** from the EPA in writing were the Adirondack Regional Chambers of Commerce, the Citizen Environmentalists Against Sludge Encapsulation, Farmers Against Irresponsible Remediation, the New York Farm Bureau and the town of Moreau. All have expressed opposition to the EPA's plan to dredge 100,000 pounds of **PCBs** from the river.

The fact that the EPA responded so quickly to the opposition is what had environmentalists who favor dredging concerned on Thursday.

"It's the first indication of backsliding. We are disappointed," said Rich Schiaro of Poughkeepsie-based Scenic Hudson. "The EPA needs to dig in its heels on this. They need to stand tough." **FACTS:COMMENTS** Written **public comments** should be sent to Alison Hess/Doug Tomchuk, **Hudson River PCBs Public Comment**, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 290 Broadway, New York, New York 10007. The proposed dredging plan, as well as the public meeting schedule, is available at <http://www.epa.gov/hudson>.

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