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PCBs shelling Hudson's turtles

Bethlehem -- High levels found in amphibians bolster case for dredging, DEC scientists say

New state findings on PCB levels in snapping turtles support the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's plan to dredge PCBs from the most contaminated spots of the river, state Department of Environmental Conservation scientists said Thursday.

The data, which come from tests on the fatty tissue, muscle tissue and livers of 21 snapping turtles and two painted turtles taken from the Hudson River this past summer, updates a study conducted in the late 1970s around the time that PCBs were banned.

But while the most recent numbers show a reduction in the amount of PCBs detected in turtle tissue a generation ago, in places like the Thompson Island Pool, where half of the 40 most highly contaminated pockets of sediment lay, the amount of PCBs in turtle fat remains startlingly high.

Translation: While a federal ban on polychlorinated biphenyls and cutbacks on seepages from General Electric Co. plants have gone a long way toward cleaning the river, without dredging, further recovery in snapping turtles is limited, according to DEC scientists.

"Shutting off the PCB flow and banning PCBs from household products helped. But we're talking about an animal's tissue still being at hazardous-waste levels," said state Wildlife Pathologist Ward Stone, who spearheaded both the late-1970s and 2000 research on turtles because their sedentary nature and long lifespans make them good indicators of environmental change.

"If we don't do anything, we're looking at another 25 years where they will still be high," Stone said.

In one case, the level of PCBs found in fat taken from the hind legs of snapping turtles trapped near the Thompson Island Pool was as high as 3,091 parts per million -- the equivalent of three grams of pure

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polychlorinated biphenyls in two pounds of tissue, said Stone.

"You would have a visible puddle of PCBs in your hand," he said.

These kind of levels, according to Al Breisch, the DEC's amphibian and reptile specialist, are impossible to achieve from just the three ounces per day that seep out of GE's Hudson Falls plant, which the company claims. The turtles must be getting the toxic chemical from diets and lives intimately connected to the river's sediments.

"I can't believe it's caused by the little bit coming from sources," Breisch said.

But GE -- which could pay for the \$460 million dredging project -- contends that while turtles do get PCBs from the environment, it's nearly impossible to tell what is coming from where.

"It's hard for a biologist to say that the three ounces per day can't translate into the amounts seen in the turtle," said Adam Ayers, GE's Hudson River ecologist.

The company also said it was nearly impossible to prefer a remedy based on the turtle data, and little to no evidence exists suggesting PCBs affect turtle populations.

But what concerns Stone and Breisch is the people along the river who are trapping and eating snapping turtles, unaware of the high levels of contaminants.

While no federal action limit exists for turtles, the state recommends that women of child-bearing age and children under 15 eat none from the river. For the rest of the population, the state Health Department recommends trimming away all fat and discarding the liver and eggs.

"We know of several commercial collectors that are hauling a bunch of them out," said Breisch. "With the contaminant levels as they are, that's probably not a good idea."

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