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## Labor groups back dredging

**Albany -- Citing risks of leaving PCBs in river, unions support EPA**

Citing the risks PCBs in the river pose to their membership and the potential for new jobs, leaders of state and regional labor unions Thursday endorsed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's proposal to dredge the Hudson River.

The 2-million-member New York state AFL-CIO said that there was unanimous support for the \$460 million plan among the six to seven labor councils that border the river. The organization has 31 labor councils statewide.

"Our members live in each of the communities affected by PCB contamination. Each day that passes without dredging increases the risk that our members and their families will fall ill," said Denis Hughes, the union's president.

The General Electric Co., which is being held liable for the contamination because it discharged millions of pounds of PCBs into the river, has maintained that dredging itself is risky -- to surrounding communities, the river and those who would perform the job.

The head of the Business Managers Operating Engineers, whose members have worked on actual dredges, said otherwise.

"It's the operating engineers who operate the dredges and equipment for the project," said Bob Jones, the president of the group.

Jones said that 75 local members of his union were employed during a 16-month, \$34 million PCB dredging project in Lake Champlain completed this past summer, which caused no risk to the workers or surrounding communities. But he couldn't predict whether the eventual contractor for the five-year Hudson River dredging project would hire locals for the job.

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The EPA, which will hammer out the details in a three-year design phase ending in 2004, has said that as many as five dredges would be used along the 35-mile-stretch of river.

The support of AFL-CIO and other labor groups for dredging mirrors the growing allegiance between labor and environmental organizations on national issues, such as free trade.

The 2,200 members of the Professional Employees Federation that work at the state Department of Environmental Conservation have already voiced their support for the dredging proposal.

But the 4,000-member International Union of Electrical Radio and Machine Workers Local 301, whose members include about 2,000 employees of GE, was not represented at the press conference Thursday. The union's business agent was not available for comment Thursday.

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