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April 17, 2001

## PCB Worries Are Spreading From Hudson to Its Shores

By ROBERT WORTH

**F**or 25 years, environmental groups and state officials have concentrated on the problems posed by toxic PCB's in the Hudson River, but now they are starting to focus on dozens of contaminated spots in landfills and backyards in the upper Hudson Valley.

More than six times as many PCB's were dumped on land as in the river, according to two separate investigations conducted by environmental groups and based on state records. Although the chemicals are not as dangerous on land as they are in the river, where they become concentrated in fish and river sediment, they are seeping into groundwater in a number of places, and may be leaking into the Hudson in a few, according to state officials.

Thirteen of the approximately 40 sites have been designated as a "significant threat to the public health or environment" by the state's Department of Environmental Conservation, and many others contain PCB's and other toxic materials in concentrations above the level the federal government classifies as hazardous. The sites are scattered on either side of the river along a 40-mile stretch between Albany and Glens Falls.

These areas and others around the country could become a huge liability for the **General Electric Corporation**, which dumped the chemicals into the river over the course of three decades from two electric capacitor plants in Fort Edward and Hudson Falls. That, environmentalists say, is why the company has spent an estimated \$60 million fighting the federal Environmental Protection Agency's \$460 million proposal to dredge PCB's, or polychlorinated biphenyls, from the Hudson River bottom. The public comment period on that proposal is to end today.

"G.E. realizes that the Hudson River cleanup will be a precedent-setting case that could ultimately require them to spend billions cleaning up toxic sites throughout the Hudson River basin, as well as elsewhere throughout the country," said Walter Hang, the president of Toxics Targeting, an Ithaca, N.Y.,

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environmental research and advocacy group that is expected to release a report today on PCB contamination in the Hudson Valley.

In addition to its Hudson Valley PCB sites, where G.E. has already spent an estimated \$160 million on studies and shore cleanup, the company signed an agreement in 1999 to clean up PCB spills in Pittsfield, Mass., at a possible cost estimated by the government of \$300 million to \$700 million. Last fall, the company filed a federal lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the Superfund law under which the federal environmental agency would order its dredging action.

Mark Behan, a spokesman for G.E., said, "We reach cleanup decisions based on what we consider best for the community and the environment at each location."

Mr. Behan added that the company reached an agreement with New York State to clean up seven of the land-based PCB dump sites in 1980, and said that in the other cases, G.E. was not liable because it did not do the actual dumping, though the chemicals may have come from its plants.

Donald Morrison, a dairy farmer whose land is a few hundred feet from the Hudson River in Moreau, N.Y., has long believed that G.E. should be forced to dredge the PCB's from the river. But like many people in this area, Mr. Morrison is also worried about the PCB's that were dumped on land. He has a 1999 letter from the state saying that tests have confirmed PCB contamination on his land, and he has been unable to sell it or get insurance or even a bank loan as a result, he said.

The unfenced 25-acre field next to Mr. Morrison's farm contains 40,000 to 90,000 pounds of PCB's dredged from the river that are seeping into the groundwater and possibly into the Hudson, according to the state. Mr. Morrison's cows graze nearby, and his corn grows next to a sign that warns of buried PCB-contaminated material in another adjacent field that is fenced.

In addition, Mr. Morrison's land is regularly flooded by the Hudson. The state has found high levels of PCB contamination in some flood plain areas along the river, and has asked the federal environmental agency for help in assessing the problem, said Michael O'Toole, the director of the agency's Division of Environmental Remediation.

Although the state has taken some steps to contain pollution at the sites, it delayed a full cleanup on most of them for more than a decade in hopes that the E.P.A. would address them in its proposal for the river, said Jennifer Meicht, a spokeswoman for the D.E.C. Now that it is clear that will not happen, the state must finish cleaning up the sites or force G.E. or other responsible parties to do so. But it cannot clean the sites until the legislature appropriates new money for the Superfund program, which is now broke.

It is hard to say what kind of health risks PCB's pose on land. The federal environmental agency has focused on the river because it has determined that eating fish or drinking water contaminated with the chemical poses a cancer

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risk, said Douglas Tomchuk, a project manager for the agency's Hudson River PCB site.

Some people in the Hudson Valley believe that they have been poisoned by exposure to the chemical, though there have been no studies to determine health effects in the area. One of Mr. Morrison's daughters, Mary Beth, 33, has deformed fingernails, which are one of the symptoms of PCB poisoning, said Dr. David Carpenter, a professor at the SUNY School of Public Health in Albany who has done research on the chemical's health effects.

The levels of land-based PCB contamination have declined since the mid-1970's, when some roads and parking lots that had been sprayed with PCB oil decades earlier still stank of the chemical on hot days.

"One day I was driving with the car window open, and the smell of PCB's came through the window," said Ward B. Stone, the state wildlife pathologist who was one of the first to discover the chemical in fish in the early 1970's.

Mr. Stone followed the smell to a South Glens Falls motel, where PCB's had been sprayed on the parking lot years earlier.

The town supervisor had paved over the parking lot, but more than a decade later, tests by state inspectors found PCB's along the edge of the pavement at 13,000 parts per million. (Federal law considers anything above 50 parts per million to be toxic waste.)

The motel was cleaned up two years ago by state officials.

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