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# A Hudson cleanup faces bitter battle

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## General Electric fights EPA plan to dredge river

By Darryl Campagna, Globe Correspondent, 4/22/2001

**A**LBANY, N.Y. - Stretching 300 miles from the Adirondacks to the Atlantic Ocean, the Hudson River is the heart and soul of upstate New York.

And for the past four months, the waterway has also been the center of the state's most bitter environmental dispute in memory.

A plan by the Environmental Protection Agency to dredge 30 years worth of toxic chemicals known as polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, from a 35-mile stretch of the upper Hudson River has pitted General Electric Co. against the government. A rancorous four-month public comment period on the dredging plan ended on April 17, and the EPA is expected to announce in August a decision on whether to proceed.

The magnitude of the problem - 200 miles of the Hudson were declared a Superfund hazardous-waste site in 1983 - combined with emotions about the river. It all made for a memorable battle, said Ann Rychlenski, a spokeswoman for the EPA regional office in New York City. The EPA received 35,000 e-mail messages and 15 cartons of mail.

By comparison, a 1999 PCB cleanup agreement with GE, involving the Housatonic River in Pittsfield, Mass., did not create nearly as much public strife, Rychlenski said.

"There's a distinct sentimental interest where the Hudson is concerned," she said. "It's a magnificent river. It's spawned a school of writing, a school of painting. It holds a very lyrical place for people."

Mark Behan, a GE spokesman, agrees that the Hudson holds a special place upstate, and says that is why the company opposes the dredging.

"In the upper Hudson River, where the dredging would take place, almost 70 percent of the public is opposed," Behan said. "They recognize that dredging would do an enormous amount of environmental damage to this river that may be irreversible, and will disrupt communities."

One such opponent is Hudson Falls resident Tim Havens, president of CEASE, which stands for Citizen Environmentalists Against Sludge

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## CEASE, which stands for Citizen Environmentalists Against Sludge Encapsulation.

"Dredging the Hudson River of 2.65 million cubic yards to get 100,000 pounds of PCBs is like buying a 747 to get free peanuts," said Havens, 38, a farm machinery dealer who has lived along the river all his life. "It's misguided. Nobody has the river in mind. We don't want that stuff in the river any more than anyone else, but we're not going to sit here and say it's going to make you glow in the dark."

GE discharged PCBs into the Hudson from manufacturing plants in Fort Edward and Hudson Falls from 1947 to 1977. PCBs were used as coolants and insulators in electrical products, but the EPA banned them in 1979.

The agency says that PCBs, which enter the food chain through fish, cause cancer in animals and probably cause cancer in humans, and pose a hazard to human brain functions and immune, nervous, and reproductive systems. The dredging would be done with machinery that sucks up the contaminated sludge and water. The disposal method for the toxic material has not been determined.

The company argues that PCB exposure can best be limited by its special wells that capture residual PCBs in soil and bedrock, and by the buildup of natural sediment over PCB "hot spots" in the Hudson. Behan said the argument over how to clean the Hudson has gone on so long - nearly 25 years - that the means are overshadowing the end.

"Everybody's goal is to reduce PCB levels in fish," Behan said. "That question is, what is the best way to achieve it without inflicting more damage on the river and the community?"

Proponents of dredging argue that tough measures are necessary. "People say, 'Well, it's just a fish; I don't eat fish.' That shows a lack of understanding of how the food chain works," said David Higby, an environmentalist who lives in Washington County, about 15 miles from the river.

"PCBs can be fingerprinted to pinpoint their origin ... And PCBs from Hudson Falls have been found in polar bears in the Arctic," Higby said.

For months, upstate residents have hardly been able to turn on their televisions or drive down a highway without confronting an anti-dredging message from GE. The campaign, which by some estimates cost GE at least \$60 million, became as much a part of the debate as the dredging itself.

"We challenge anybody to find a more expensive corporate campaign budget ever, certainly in an environmental issue," said Jeff Jones, spokesman for Friends of a Clean Hudson, a coalition of environmental groups that supports dredging.

For David P. White, publisher of the Albany Times Union, the frenzy seems to reflect a bigger movement to connect with this river.

"There's a feeling of warmth and caring - 'It's part of my life,'" said White, whose paper supports dredging editorially, but also ran anti-dredging ads from GE.

"There's some real-life kinds of things about this river people used to enjoy, and haven't for a while, because it was polluted for so long, and the highway was built," White said. He referred to Interstate 787, which opened in 1971 and which separates the city from the Hudson.

Now, attention is turning to the EPA announcement in August. The decision is supposed to be signed by the regional EPA administrator in New York, but that post is vacant. William Muszynski, a career civil servant with the EPA, is acting regional administrator and will sign it instead, unless the Bush administration appoints a replacement.

Whoever ends up signing the decision, many observers say, people on both sides of the issue will probably be unhappy.

John Sweeney, the Republican congressman whose 22d District includes upstate communities near the proposed dredging site, agrees with that assessment. Sweeney, who favors cleaning the river but opposes dredging, says the important issues got overshadowed by emotions and politics.

"The people most directly affected have been pretty much ignored," Sweeney said. "I think one of the great tragedies of what is happening here is, it's going to be very difficult to come to a consensus."

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