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back 

Pataki pushes Hudson cleanup

Last-minute call to EPA chief by governor comes amid talk of compromise plan for dredging PCBs from 6-mile stretch of river

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With a decision on dredging the Hudson River imminent and talk of a compromise plan, Gov. George E. Pataki for the first time contacted EPA Administrator Christie Whitman to push for a cleanup, officials said Wednesday.

"The governor encouraged her to move forward with a comprehensive plan to restore the Hudson River to health as well as for protections for upriver communities," said Michael McKeon, the governor's spokesman. "He knows the river needs help."

The last-minute call Tuesday night came hours after Attorney General Eliot Spitzer confirmed that the EPA was seriously considering a scaled-back proposal, which would reportedly cost \$100 million and focus on a 6-mile stretch of river.

McKeon would not elaborate on what the governor meant by a comprehensive plan.

Whitman is expected to make a decision on the cleanup of the Hudson River, one of the nation's largest Superfund sites, as early as Friday.

The proposal would then be reviewed by the state for a month, with a final verdict expected in September.

Historically, the backing of the state has been critical for federal Superfund cleanups, according to the EPA.

The governor finds himself balancing upstate opposition to the project with downstate support, not to mention the views of the General Electric Co., a company with a large presence in New York, and the one responsible for the PCB pollution.

The company has steadfastly opposed the plan proposed under the Clinton administration in December, which called for the targeted dredging of hot spots along a 35-mile stretch of river from Hudson Falls to the Troy Dam.

Since the December proposal, Pataki has been mum on the issue. The discussion with Whitman marked the first time the governor has taken a stance on dredging since last October, when then-Environmental Conservation Commissioner John P. Cahill wrote the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency backing "active remediation," which can refer to dredging.

The three-page letter, which was drafted after the state had a sneak preview of the \$460 million proposal unveiled late last year, indicated support for the removal of millions of cubic yards of PCB-tainted sediment from the river bottom.

"The EPA's preferred remedial alternative would likely achieve significant reductions in risks associated with the site," Cahill wrote.

In the meantime, the political maelstrom around Pataki has swirled as criticism of his less-than-clear position -- from activists on both sides of the dredging issue -- has mounted.

While a host of elected officials -- including Spitzer and U.S. Reps. John Sweeney, R-Halfmoon; Michael McNulty, D-Green Island and Maurice Hinchey, D-Saugerties -- have met with Whitman personally in Washington, Pataki sent newly-appointed Environmental Commissioner Erin M. Crotty to meet with the administrator on June 8.

Weeks later, he vowed to lobby the administrator personally, a move that angered upriver residents who are opposed to dredging.

Sweeney, who is at odds with the governor on the dredging issue, refused to comment on Pataki's latest lobbying efforts.

Meanwhile, on the heels of Spitzer's statement about a \$100 million compromise on the project, environmentalists have pushed the governor to clarify his position.

Environmentalists said Wednesday that while Pataki's contacting Whitman was promising, he should do more -- especially in light of rumors of a possible deal happening in Washington.

"The fact that he has reached out to her after all these months is encouraging," said Chris Ballantyne with the Sierra Club.

Ballantyne, and as many as 10 other individuals from the Hudson River environmental community, are expected to meet with Whitman this afternoon, after months of trying to get an appointment. They say their message will stress the effect of PCBs on human health, namely that they are a probable human carcinogen.

Some lawmakers questioned the politics behind Whitman's sudden meeting with the pro-dredging groups.

"(The EPA) wants to be covered and not have criticism from the environmental community," said Hinchey. "If they put out a plan that is less than comprehensive they better say they met with the environmental community."

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