

GE, EPA meeting raises concerns

Environmentalists, some state officials upset over private meeting on dredging standards after public period ended

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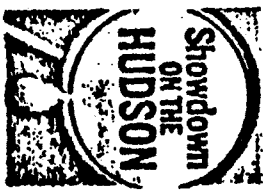
A General Electric Co. vice president met with high-level U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials in Washington following the Bush administration's endorsement of a \$460 million plan to dredge the Hudson River, the EPA has confirmed.

Stephen D. Ramsey, the vice president of the company's corporate environmental programs, and a visible figure in GE's campaign against dredging PCBs from a 35-mile stretch of the river north of Troy, attended a meeting with EPA Administrator Christie Whitman's chief of staff sometime after July 31, according to Tina Kriehner, an EPA spokeswoman. The meeting — coming more than a month after the end of the public comment period and before a final decision on dredging — has prompted speculation within the environmental community and state government that GE is attempting to alter the plan before it becomes final later this year.

A state Department of Environmental Conservation official, who had contact with the EPA, said GE, which discharged millions of pounds of PCBs into the river over three decades, was seeking to insert performance standards into the dredging plan that could end dredging early on.

These standards — which could set levels for reduction of PCBs in sediment, water, fish and shorelines — were changes made by the state to

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GE: Private meeting with EPA questioned

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the initial EPA dredging proposal unveiled during the Clinton Administration in December. The state's idea of monitoring after each phase of the project was later incorporated into the draft plan issued by Whitman in July.

The monitoring was seen as a way to measure the effectiveness of dredging over the course of the five-year cleanup. But the standards were not expected to be hammered out until the three-

year design phase, which would occur before the start of dredging.

"It's a time bomb that GE is dropping (into dredging)," said the DEC official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "We are not very happy about this. Criteria should be established in the design."

GE said as a policy it does not comment on meetings. A DEC spokeswoman refused to comment. The EPA, saying it was busy with assisting in the World

Trade Center disaster, would not provide a date nor what was discussed with the company.

It is not illegal for the EPA to meet with corporations that it has labeled responsible for Superfund sites. But, by law, the decision on how to clean up the Hudson River must be based on the record, not what transpires in private meetings, according to environmental attorneys.

Over the four-month public comment period, which ended in June, the EPA gathered more

than 70,000 comments from e-mails, letters and public hearings. And as trustees for the Hudson River, the state, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have all had a look at and a chance to comment on the draft proposal.

U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-Saugerties, accused the EPA of giving special consideration to the company.

"It's inappropriate for the EPA to be meeting with the

polluter," Hinchey said.

But for many who have participated in the debate over dredging the Hudson River, GE continuing to press its position isn't a surprise. The company has already employed influential lobbyists such as former Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell, former House appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston, and former U.S. Rep. Gerald Solomon to carry its anti-dredging message on Capitol Hill. And during the four-month public comment period, it spent an estimated \$60 million on advertisements that said the river was cleaning itself.

And repeatedly, the argument over whether to dredge or not dredge have boiled down to science. GE believes that the source of PCBs to fish and wildlife is the ounces a day still leaking out of its plant and the surface sediment. The EPA says its evidence points to the pockets of toxic chemical entombed deep in the river's bed.

"The message that we are getting is that we have to stay on this continually," said David Higby of Albany-based Environmental Advocates. "There is probably already something in (the final plan) that will stretch it out."

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