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Environmentalists Oppose Shift on Hudson Dredging
By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

WASHINGTON, Oct. 2 - A half- dozen environmentalists told officials at the Environmental Protection Agency here today that they opposed altering the government's half-billion-dollar directive on how the General Electric Company should dredge the Hudson River of poisonous chemicals.

The agency is considering inserting specific performance standards in its directive now rather than during the next three years of analysis in the design phase of the project, as is customary.

Environmentalists argued that this change would allow G.E., which has always resisted the cleanup plan, to scuttle it by setting standards too high to meet.

Tina Kreisher, a spokeswoman for the agency, said the environmentalists had said bluntly that they believed that General Electric was behind the proposal to insert performance standards at this stage.

She said that Eileen McGinnis, chief of staff to Christie Whitman, the agency's administrator, had responded that it was Mrs. Whitman who had come up with the idea "to ensure this was done correctly and have some accountability."

The environmentalists at the meeting said Ms. McGinnis also told them that because Mrs. Whitman deemed the project to be of such national significance - it is at least 10 times bigger than any other cleanup project in the nation's history - she might want the project to be overseen by the agency's Washington headquarters rather than its regional office in New York.

Andy Mele, executive director of the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater Inc., said after the meeting, "We are concerned that G.E. will exploit the fact that the E.P.A. staff in Washington hasn't been following this issue."

Ms. Kreisher said the agency was still exploring whether to incorporate the standards in the final record of decision, which has been delayed by several weeks, in part because of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and whether to move the project from New York to Washington. "That's what we're listening about," she said. "We're just taking information."

Ned Sullivan, president of Scenic Hudson and one of those meeting today with agency officials, said the agency wanted to set specific standards regarding the rate of progress and what was called resuspension - that is, how much the dredging stirred up chemicals from the bottom of the river.

"This is setting up the project for failure," Mr. Sullivan said. "You can only make judgments about production rate when you have a specific design."

"We're very concerned that these performance standards are G.E.'s concerns, and the notion that there could be significant 'adjustments' - their word - in the remedy because of a failure to achieve some kind of production rate in the first year sends up red flags to us that these reflect G.E.'s continued desire to see this project fail."

Environmentalists and supporters of the dredging project have criticized the agency for meeting with General Electric, suggesting the two were in cahoots to provide a bureaucratic way to kill the project after the agency announced in August that it would proceed.

Gary Scheffer, chief spokesman for G.E., said that company officials were furious at implications that they have been using the cover of the terrorist attacks in New York, which displaced the regional E.P.A. offices, to try to kill the dredging project.

In fact, they were trying to kill it before then, spending more than \$60 million on an intense anti-dredging advertising and lobbying campaign. Mr. Scheffer said General Electric's primary focus in the last three weeks had been on helping New York recover from the disaster.

"We had two people killed, one in an airplane and one in the trade center," he said. "We have given \$10 million to start the mayor's Twin Towers Fund, our employees gave \$1.5 million to the American Red Cross and we're going to match that, for \$3 million to the Red Cross."

He said the company had also supplied equipment like power generators and medical diagnostic machines in Lower Manhattan and the personnel to run them, bringing G.E.'s total expenditures in the last three weeks to nearly \$20 million.