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EPA weighs limits on dredging

Environmentalists wary of standards for amount of sediment stirred up

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is strongly considering setting limits on the amount of sediment stirred up during Hudson River dredging and how fast it would be removed, according to environmentalists who met Tuesday with top agency officials.

In an 80-minute meeting with EPA Administrator Christie Whitman's chief-of-staff and other top staffers in Washington, D.C., eight representatives from Hudson Valley environmental groups were asked to comment on the pair of performance standards. The EPA is considering writing the standards into a final decision, rather than waiting until the project is designed over three years.

EPA representatives said that if these standards were not met over the project's course, dredging would be adjusted. Although no specific numbers were laid out, environmentalists are worried that the levels could be strict enough to terminate the cleanup.

"If those limits are not realistic it could kill dredging altogether," said David Higby of Environmental Advocates.

"It's a mistake," added Ned Sullivan, executive director of Scenic Hudson, who said he had never before seen such criteria in a final decision without study or being subjected to public comment.

EPA officials also told the group Tuesday that they may issue the dredging decision out of Washington instead of the regional office in New York City, which would suggest that control over the project has switched to headquarters. In the mid-1980s, the Reagan administration overrode the suggestion of the regional office with a decision to take no action on the millions of pounds of PCBs lining the Hudson River.

A spokeswoman in the EPA's regional office said that no decision on who would sign the final decision had been made, but that it was delayed from its expected release in September to at least next month. "It's slipped past October," said EPA spokeswoman Mary Mears. "We hope to get it to the state (for review) in a couple of weeks."



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The meeting with environmentalists Tuesday came after the EPA had already met twice with General Electric Co., the corporation which discharged PCBs into the river from its Fort Edward and Hudson Falls capacitor plants over three decades, contaminating the river along 200 miles.

A company spokesman said Tuesday that GE was "reviewing the issue" and that "performance standards can and should be included" in any final decision.

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