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Environmentalists meet with EPA over dredging

Advocates fear final decision based on politics, not science

By JASON McCORD
mccord@poststar.com

Environmentalists who met with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials Tuesday said they came away concerned that a final record of decision to clean up the Hudson River will be influenced by politics.

David Higby, a Salem resident who works for Environmental Advocates in Albany, said EPA officials told him and other pro-dredging groups that the final decision may come out of Washington and not the Region 2 office in New York City.

That news upsets environmental groups, Higby said, because they feel it shows the EPA is moving in the direction of a political decision instead of one based on science.

"Region 2 spent 10 years putting the feasibility study together and they may be cut out of the final decision altogether by an administration that's been there since January," Higby said.

Environmentalists are also concerned about the record of decision because General Electric Co. representatives met with EPA officials in the last couple weeks at Administrator Christie Whitman's request, Higby said.

Higby said he thinks a major reason the EPA agreed to meet with environmentalists so quickly was because they realized they shouldn't have met with GE.

Environmentalists asked when the record of decision might be released, but EPA officials declined to give even a "ballpark" date, Higby said.

EPA officials did not return repeated phone calls.

Fort Edward Supervisor Marilyn Pulver said the possibility of a decision emanating from Washington is good news for dredging opponents who have asked all along that Region 2 be left out of the final decision.

Pulver said she favors a decision from Washington for the same reason that environmentalists want it to come from Region 2.

"Region 2 has shown it's biased and it has a definite agenda," Pulver said.

Pulver cited numerous examples she felt showed the New York City office's bias, including keeping project information hidden and "being less than truthful."

Another concern for environmentalists are the performance standards that Whitman announced would be part of the plan to clean up the Hudson River. Those standards involve periodic testing of PCB levels and resuspension of dredged material to ensure the project is working.

While environmentalists agree with the EPA's reasons for proposing the performance standards, Higby said they should only be created during the design phase, when more specific data is known.

"Performance standards are very important to any project like this and we think they are too important to just arbitrarily stick them in at the beginning of the project," Higby said.

Sharon Ruggi, a Fort Edward councilwoman and a member of the local anti-dredging group CEASE, criticized the environmentalists' stance. She said the performance standards are "imperative" to monitor the harm that dredging is sure to do.

"Putting this decision off until the design phase will allow pro-dredging advocates to lower performance standards, thereby increasing the amount of PCB resuspension deemed acceptable," she said.

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