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Hearing focuses on delay in PCBs' removal

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Thirteen years after the General Electric Co. admitted dumping 1.3 million pounds of toxic chemicals into the Hudson River, removal of PCBs has yet to get under way.

Two environmental groups, the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater and Scenic Hudson, this week criticized the federal Environmental Protection Agency for taking so long to get rid of the PCBs.

The EPA has issued another in a long line of reports — there are 30,000 documents so far — about PCBs and how they should be removed from the bottom of the river.

In a report to be discussed tonight at a public meeting in Poughkeepsie, the EPA says more research is necessary. The meeting will be in Windsor suites 1 and 2 of the Radisson hotel.

PCBs were used for electrical insulation and are widespread in the environment, so much so the EPA says it's likely that half the Hudson's PCB load come from drains, outfalls and scores of other sources. General Electric has admitted dumping 1.3 million pounds of PCBs from its plants above the Troy Dam.

The company has paid \$7 million to the state for cleanup and penalties. But General Electric faces millions more if

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the EPA decides that the company has to dredge up PCB deposits on the bed of the Hudson near Troy.

Because PCBs wash down river, the entire length of the Hudson to the Battery, about 200 miles, has been declared a federal PCB Superfund cleanup site. Commercial fishing for striped bass has been banned and anglers have been discouraged from eating fish they catch.

Going into tonight's public meeting, being held to discuss the EPA's latest findings, General Electric has argued that its scientists have found a way to destroy PCBs with microbes.

But biologist Donald Kent of the Hudson River Sloop

Clearwater said the microbes are unproven and not as effective as new dredging methods developed and approved by EPA for PCB removal in other states.

"Remove them with a dredge and place them in a containment facility and GE can fool around with biodegradation all they want," said Kent.

GE officials couldn't be reached.

Cara Lee, environmental director of Scenic Hudson said the tone of the latest EPA study on PCB removal "is overly simplistic" in estimating that the risk from PCBs is less now than it was 13 years ago.

She also said the EPA did not distribute its new study widely south of Saratoga. There are no copies in the Newburgh Free Library, but EPA spokesman Herman Phillips said there are copies at the Adriaance library in Poughkeepsie and at state Environmental Conservation Department headquarters in New Paltz. Phillips couldn't say why Newburgh was bypassed.

Environmental groups sued the EPA in the early 1980s when the federal agency withheld \$20 million in PCB cleanup funds set aside by Congress. So much time has passed that even though the environmentalists won their lawsuit, the money has been reallocated to sewer projects.