

Housatonic River makes group's endangered list
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WASHINGTON

The Housatonic River has been named one of America's most endangered rivers by a national environmental group.

American Rivers ranked the Housatonic seventh on its 2004 list of the 10 most-endangered rivers, warning that the long-term health of the river is at a critical turning point.

The nonprofit environmental group is urging the Environmental Protection Agency to require Fairfield, Conn.-based General Electric to remove toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) from the entire length of the river. From 1932 to 1977, a GE electrical transformer factory in Pittsfield, Mass., discharged tons of PCBs that polluted the river, nearby lakes, groundwater, soil and landfills in the area.

"Cleanup of the river has barely begun," said Rebecca R. Wodder, president of American Rivers. "We have put the river on our list this year to warn that it might never be finished."

American Rivers began issuing an annual list of "America's Most Endangered Rivers" in 1986 to highlight rivers facing the most uncertain futures rather than the worst chronic problems. This is the first year that a river running through Connecticut has made the list.

"It has been 27 years since the use and indiscriminate dumping of PCBs was banned by our public officials, but it has also been 27 years of arrogant dissembling and delay," said Audrey Cole, an attorney with the Housatonic Environmental Action League of Cornwall, Conn. "Meanwhile, the General Electric Corp. has prospered, and our river has suffered. Turn on any television or radio station in the country, or look up the massive dollars funneled to political campaigns, and you will see General Electric's dollars at work to stymie a credible solution to their polluting legacy. If only those dollars were spent on our river."

The Housatonic flows 149 miles from its source in western Massachusetts through western Connecticut before emptying into a large tidal estuary and Long Island Sound.

GE has acknowledged discarding almost 20 tons of PCBs into the river but the Housatonic River Initiative, citing information provided by a former GE employee, pegs the number at nearly 750 tons.

The most severe concentrations of the chemical among the highest in the nation

are found in the sediment at the bottom of the river between the Pittsfield facility and Woods Pond Dam about 10 miles downstream, according to the report.

Although this dam has prevented large quantities of PCBs from moving farther downstream, the river contains dangerous levels of PCBs below the dam all the way to its mouth, according to the report.

In 1977, the Connecticut Department of Public Health issued advisories for the consumption of fish from the Housatonic. A similar warning followed in Massachusetts five years later, and in 1999 that state added an advisory about consuming Housatonic waterfowl.

The EPA found that people consuming Housatonic River fish and waterfowl, especially above the dam, are up to 1,000 times more likely to be stricken with cancer and other maladies, such as reproductive problems.

In 1997, the federal government sued GE, and the settlement led to cleanup of the half-mile stretch of the Housatonic immediately alongside the Pittsfield factory. This was completed in 2002.

GE is also required to help pay for cleanup on the next 1.5 miles of river below the factory site, a job that should be completed in the next year or so.

Gary Sheffer, a spokesman for GE, said the company already has spent more than \$260 million on the cleanup and is working with the EPA to determine what further steps need to be taken.

"There already is a process in place to address these issues," Sheffer said.

The EPA has been studying the impact of the Housatonic 's PCB contamination on human health and fish and wildlife. It also is examining whether river flow and weather could cause the PCB contamination to migrate downstream.

The EPA is expected to finalize these reports by the end of the year.

After that, GE will present the agency with six alternatives for addressing the remaining contamination ranging from doing nothing to dredging the entire river.

"We are going to continue to work with EPA through the process and hope for a reasonable and workable decision that is based on the best science," Sheffer said.

American Rivers, however, is skeptical about GE's commitment to cleaning up the river.

"We've seen them as having more of a reputation for hiring lobbyists to make their case rather than environmental engineers to clean up the river," Senn said.

Other rivers named to American Rivers ' 2004 endangered list are: the Colorado, Mississippi, Tennessee, Snake, Big Sunflower River in Mississippi, Allegheny and Monongahela rivers in Pennsylvania, Spokane River in Washington, Peace River in Florida, and Big Darby Creek in Ohio.