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Letters to the Editor

Debunking GE's cleanup video

Recently, we at Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT) have found ourselves responding to this question many times. Which PCB cleanup solution for the Housatonic River does BEAT support? The question is prompted by GE's video that presents GE's view on the subject.

The basic premise of the video is this. There are three options for remediating the river: Monitored Natural Recovery, SED 3/FP 3, and The Ecologically Sensitive Approach (ESA). GE created these three approaches, named them, and is now presenting them to us with the implication that these are EPA's ideas. GE has submitted a list of approaches to EPA, but EPA isn't bound to select from any list — certainly not from one created by GE. The tactic here is to convince us that there are three choices and that one, SED 3/FP 3, is so terrible that we had better choose one of the others quickly. GE made up this game. Let's not play it.

According to GE, monitored natural recovery is the approach whereby the PCBs flowing into the river are reduced, and then natural sedimentation buries the remaining PCBs in the river. Since the courts have already told GE that it has to stop the flow of PCBs into the river, GE has nothing to lose by offering this part of its plan. Also, keep in mind that according to GE's studies, the natural sedimentation rate for most of the river above Woods Pond is 0.05 inches per year to 0.6 inches per year. One muskrat rubbing its belly along the bottom of the river can undue years worth of sedimentation.

SED 3/FP 3 is the approach GE uses to scare us. It's only in comparison to this plan that GE has any hope of selling its preferred plan — SED 10/FP 9. This is the official name of the ESA, but GE likes this option so they gave it a warm and fuzzy name — The Ecologically Sensitive Approach.

GE's portrayal of how remediation of a vernal pool was handled during the cleanup of the first two miles of the river is a misrepresentation of facts at best. According to its expert from Pennsylvania, trees were removed from the vernal pool to such a large degree that sunlight changed the nature of the pool, allowing predatory green frogs to invade, making repopulation of the pool with beneficial species when the pool finally recovers in a few years unlikely. Well, the fact (GE and EPA documents) is that only one cottonwood tree was removed from the area near the pool. The green frogs were there before remediation. The beneficial species came back immediately without missing even one season. GE also used a photoshopping technique to show us what the vernal pool would look like after remediation, even though it could have just taken a picture of the vernal pool after remediation. But that would have shown that remediation worked.

GE has money to run expensive ads asking people to view its video and hear the violins playing while the sweet voice of the narrator extols the virtues of the ESA. We don't have money for violins and voice talent, but we do have a nine- year history of working to protect the river. BEAT has prepared a debunking of this video at www.thebeatnews.org.

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