

GE Paying Dearly For PCB Dumping In 1930's

Bob Salsberg, Associated Press Writer

LENOX, Mass. (AP) — Once a dumping ground for chemicals, a stretch of the Housatonic River that winds near this Berkshires hamlet is being scoured in a lengthy, expensive cleanup. Now, dredging other parts of the riverbed is under consideration, but the fishers, bird watchers and swimmers who would benefit are wondering how much effort is too much.

General Electric Co. used compounds called PCBs, now known to cause cancer, in producing transformers from 1932 to 1977 at its 254-acre plant in Pittsfield, Mass. Under a federal consent decree about two decades after it stopped, the company began cleaning up PCBs that had spewed for years into a residential neighborhood and a 2-mile stretch of the Housatonic.

Now, the \$400 million first phase of the cleanup is almost over. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency must decide in coming months what to do about pollution in the rest of the 149-mile river that flows through rural western Massachusetts and Connecticut and empties into Long Island Sound.

Options presented by GE include extensive dredging and removing up to 2.25 million cubic yards of PCB-tainted sediment and floodplain soil, and "monitored natural recovery," a euphemism for little more than hopeful watching and waiting.

"Many sportsmen don't want anything done. They want the river to heal itself," said Mark Jester, president of the 3,000-member Berkshire County League of Sportsmen.

Jester, who enjoys duck hunting and other activities, said sportsmen worry that dredging could spoil the character of the river and disrupt recreational activity. He's quick to add, however, that he favors an "ecologically sensitive" compromise in which GE would decontaminate "hot spots" on the river, with limited dredging.

Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, are chemical compounds once used widely as coolants and lubricants in electrical equipment. The government considers PCBs a probable human carcinogen and studies show they pose a risk to wildlife in the river ecosystem, including fish, frogs, waterfowl and mink.

Though banned in 1977, the compounds remain a problem because they do not readily break down in the environment and persist over long periods of time.

The goal remains a "fishable, swimmable river," said Tim Gray, executive director of the Housatonic River Initiative.

Advisories against eating fish are posted along the full length of the river, and GE contends that under current EPA standards, even the most aggressive cleanup won't bring down those signs.

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Gray and other environmentalists say GE should consider newer technologies such as using chemicals, intense heat or even biological agents to separate the PCBs from soil or sediment and destroy them. The company has said such methods are too untested to be reliable.

"General Electric makes aircraft engines; they are smart engineers. They can figure out how to clean this river," Gray said.

The Housatonic debate echoes an ongoing one involving the Hudson River in New York, where GE is paying for the cleanup of PCBs that were discharged from plants at Fort Edward and Hudson Falls. The company last year dredged sediment from the river about 40 miles north of Albany, but claimed the work actually stirred up PCBs in the water and spread them down river. GE proposed to halt further excavation.

GE has until Oct. 15 to submit revised recommendations for cleaning the river to the EPA. Without giving specifics, the company says it will offer two revised proposals that reflect the concern that dredging can harm the river as much as help it.

"The point with these environmentally sensitive alternatives is to take a less ecologically invasive approach, with less dredging and looking at more targeted extraction of PCBs," said Peter O'Toole, a GE spokesman.

In 2008, GE gave the EPA a 722-page report recommending a 10-year, \$184 million plan to remove and dispose of about 250,000 tons of river sediment and about 90,000 tons of floodplain soil. The company said it would reduce by 94 percent the levels of PCBs moving downstream and cut the levels in fish by at least 70 percent.

Under the consent decree, GE must pay for any cleanup.

David Carpenter, a PCBs expert at the State University of New York-Albany, said he advocates dredging because PCBs are so persistent.

"Natural processes are never going to take care of these compounds," he said. "They are only going to spread."

Another issue is how much of the Housatonic to cleanse. It's widely believed that the final order will focus primarily on the most heavily contaminated portion, a roughly 10-mile stretch from Pittsfield to Woods Pond in Lenox.

Created by a nearby dam, the manmade pond sits quietly tucked away at the foot of October Mountain in the picturesque Berkshires. The government says PCBs are embedded in the pond sediment and adjacent floodplain soil.

The Connecticut portion of the river is likely to be subject largely to monitoring only, though state officials have argued that GE should address PCBs that have collected at dams that once helped power mill towns along the river.

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Officials must sort through the arguments before making a decision.

"While we all hope we'll have a clean Housatonic, we have to go through that process to determine exactly how clean that will be," said Susan Svirsky, the EPA's Housatonic River project manager.

For Thomas Hoffman, of Washington, Mass., the debate is personal on two levels.

Hoffman said his father worked for GE in Pittsfield for 40 years before dying of pancreatic cancer at age 59. He can't prove the cancer was linked to PCBs and doesn't hold the company responsible for his father's death, but does fault the company for not acting quickly enough when it began to realize the extent of the environmental disaster.

These days, he enjoys catching "trophy-sized" bass and pike and relishes canoe trips down the Housatonic where he can paddle for miles in solitude while catching glimpses of otter, ospreys and even bald eagles.

Hoffman shudders at the thought of "heavy machinery" tearing up the river but also realizes that something must be done.

"Yes, it has to be cleaned up," said Hoffman. "To not clean it up and pretend (the PCBs) will go away is not the answer."

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