

2 studies document PCB harm

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Seven years after work began and almost five years after a cleanup settlement was finalized in federal court, the U.S. Environmental Protection agency has finished two massive studies that document the harm PCBs are doing to people and the environment along the Housatonic River.

The EPA has declared its assessments of both human health and ecological risk complete. It is a major milestone in the ongoing effort to cope with the legacy of pollution left after General Electric shuttered most of its Pittsfield plant. It means the government and the company can shift focus from deciding whether the contamination is harmful to deciding what to do about it.

Further cleanup?

A settlement among the EPA, GE, the city of Pittsfield and several other government agencies mandated a cleanup in the first two miles of the Housatonic south of GE's plant. But the fate of the rest of the river is still to be determined, and these two reports are meant to help guide that decision. Federal officials have estimated the entire cleanup — including that of the GE plant and the river — could cost between \$300 million and \$700 million.

The human health assessment concluded that PCBs in the Housatonic are a threat to people, and that those who eat fish, ducks and geese face an unacceptable risk of cancer. Someone eating an 8-ounce filet from a Housatonic fish once a week for 60 years would face a 1-in-33 chance of contracting cancer, the EPA concluded.

The ecological study found that bottom-dwelling organisms, frogs and fish-eating mammals like mink and otter face serious harm from the PCB pollution found in some stretches of the river. All are at high risk for survival and reproduction. Less threatened but still considered "somewhat at risk" are some fish-eating birds, shrews, foxes and endangered species such as bald eagles.

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Key findings

The Environmental Protection Agency has completed two major studies of the impact of PCBs in the Housatonic River on people and the environment.

Key findings:

- PCBs are a threat to people, and that those who eat fish, ducks and geese face an unacceptable risk of cancer.
- Bottom-dwelling organisms, frogs and fish-eating mammals like mink and otter face serious harm from PCB pollution in some stretches of the river. All are at high risk for survival and reproduction.
- Less threatened but still "somewhat at risk" are some fish-eating birds, shrews, foxes and endangered species such as bald eagles.

dence for the studies in 1998, and drafts of the reports were first issued in 2003. They have undergone extensive review by GE, environmental advocates and scientific experts.

Susan Svirsky, the EPA's project manager for the Rest of River, said the extensive public comment opportunities on both reports and the careful review by experts have yielded "risk assessments that have been widely vetted and closely scrutinized, and EPA believes that it demonstrates the use of rigorous, sound science in documenting the risks to people and animals that are exposed to PCBs and other contaminants from the Housatonic River."

Both reports will now become part of the evidence the EPA and GE weigh as they determine what further cleanup should be done. While the heaviest pollution is found in the 10 miles between Pittsfield and Woods Pond in Lenox, the agency could order a cleanup stretching all the way to the Connecticut border or even to the Long Island Sound.

Under the terms of the PCB settlement, GE will propose cleanup goals within the next three months based on the conclusions in the

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two risk assessments. The EPA can then accept those goals or ask that they be revised. Once those are agreed upon, the EPA and GE will use a computer model to determine the best cleanup plan, and the EPA expects to announce its decision in late summer of 2007.

Timothy Gray, the executive director of the Housatonic River Initiative, an environmental advocacy group that has commented extensively on the reports, said he believes both are strong and were made stronger by the review process.

"Both reports sound the alarm that the river continues to be in grave peril from the PCBs," Gray said. "Although two miles of the river are being cleaned up, there is a huge section that has some of the highest levels of this chemical in the world."

But he said the EPA's process "falls short" by failing to look beyond the Housatonic and Berkshire County. Polar bears, orcas, even snails are being harmed by PCBs, he said, and, because of its widespread saturation of the food chain, people now carry PCBs in their bodies.

GE used PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, in the large transformers it manufactured at its Morningside plant in the center of Pittsfield. The federal government banned the chemical in 1977.

A cleanup is under way in the 250-acre plant, including a portion that has been turned over to Pittsfield for redevelopment as an industrial park. GE has dredged a half mile of the Housatonic, and the EPA is about halfway done with cleanup in the next 1 1/2-mile stretch.

A call to a GE spokesman seeking comment was not returned in time to be included in this report.

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