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Officials seek PCBs burial site

By Judy Katz

To test local reaction to sites near Pittsfield identified as potential burial grounds for Housatonic River sediment tainted with toxic PCBs, state and federal environmental agencies have outlined a series of meetings culminating in a public forum Nov. 1.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency mandated investigation of one of the sites, Silver Lake near the General Electric Co. plant, this summer.

The two other possible locations for burying the waste sediment have not been officially disclosed. Environmental officials said in Hartford on Tuesday that they want to give that information directly to residents of the affected communities before making it public. But an EPA engineer indicated that Woods Pond and its backwaters is a likely candidate.

The Nov. 1 public forum will be an open meeting and has been tentatively set for 7 p.m. in the Berkshire Athenaeum auditorium. It will come after a briefing for area congressional and state lawmakers and meetings with elected officials and boards of each affected community, according to regional hazardous waste program chief Stephen F. Joyce of the state Department of Environmental Quality Engineering and engineer Patricia Hynes of the EPA.

The section of the Housatonic targeted for action stretches from GE's Pittsfield plant, the original source of the PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — to Woods Pond on the Lee-Lenox line.

No PCB burial ground may be needed. Of three cleanup options being evaluated by GE in compliance with a joint state-federal order, only one, dredging, involves massive removal of PCB-containing sediments. The study to determine which option will do the most good in relation to its cost is just beginning.

But Joyce and Hynes, speaking in Hartford on Tuesday at a meeting of a working group on water-borne pollutants that cross state lines, stressed the importance of giving area residents an early voice.

"We want to defuse opposition by making sure people have all the facts," Joyce said.

Hynes, who monitors GE's compliance with the order to study PCBs in the Housatonic, said the disposal-site controversy that is holding up a larger PCB cleanup project for the Hudson River contains a lesson. That lesson, she said, is that "to select a site and present it as a fait accompli is to set yourselves up for trouble."

GE talked over three sites with the EPA last week, Hynes said. But she said they still have to be checked against "a maze of regulations" that could scratch one or more from the list.

Because the affected communities should get the list first, she said, she declined to reveal specific locations at the Hartford session, which was attended mainly by Connecticut residents.

But she did talk about the sites in general terms and identified Silver Lake by name because its status as

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a candidate has been public knowledge for months.

The EPA asked GE to investigate ways of turning part of Silver Lake into a sediment receptacle by diverting the water.

Among Silver Lake's advantages, Hynes said, are that it already contains about 60,000 pounds of PCBs and is clearly "an industrial lake, not a living, biologically attractive water system."

Also, she pointed out when her agency first proposed the site, it makes sense to bury GE's PCBs on GE property.

A second possibility, she said, is a site close to the river. "The most obvious, for those who know the river, would be Woods Pond and the backwaters of Woods Pond," she said. "Woods Pond is already a sink for PCB sediments."

Such a site would minimize the need to truck sediments through areas where people live, she said. It could minimize disturbance to the river as well because "less total work would need to be done."

And, she said, — as in the case of Silver Lake — the disposal spot would be one that is contaminated anyway.

But, she said, such an alternative "would disturb the ecosystem."

The third possibility would be an upland site away from the river, she said. To be suitable, she said, land would have to have clay soil, be close to the dredging area, be easily reached by road and be the correct distance from bedrock, streams and populated areas.

Publicly owned land would be best, to eliminate the need to take private property, she said.

Ronald F. Desgroseilliers, GE's Pittsfield environmental manager, said all sites under consideration "belong to the commonwealth or another public organization."

Not for export

Trucking the sediment out of state is not an option. Hynes said there is no suitable out-of-state landfill available.

And, she added, even if there were, she would consider it a waste of scarce hazardous-waste landfill space to use it for PCBs so lightly concentrated in such large volumes of sediment.

"It is better to save the space for the most toxic wastes," she said. "A responsible approach is that waste generated locally should be dealt with locally."

Desgroseilliers added that the amount of sediment that would be scooped from the Housatonic if dredging is the ultimate choice — 250,000 cubic yards — would fill all the space prepared for PCBs in the only two chemical landfills in the nation now certified to receive them.

Citing a recent U.S. Geological Survey study, Hynes said PCBs bonded to particles of sediment are excellent candidates for proper land disposal.

Once the PCB molecules attach themselves to a particle of soil, she said, they hang on. If the soil stays put, the PCBs stay put.

Recent Geological Survey tests on wells at the Schweitzer division of Kimberly-Clark Corp. in Lee that are "five feet from contaminated Woods Pond sediment," she said, established that sediment-bound PCBs will not dissolve in water or migrate.

She said the well was pumped, sucking up ground water from beneath the contaminated area. But the water remained free of PCBs.

Problem in river

PCBs in river sediments are a problem because particles carried along by river currents carry PCBs piggyback. Also, they can be taken up by water plants and consumed by animals such as fish and frogs. Tests have shown that Housatonic fish and frogs contain more than the 2 parts per million limit of PCBs that the federal Food and Drug Administration has set for food fish.

PCBs, which resist natural breakdown, can accumulate in the fat of animals and become concentrated in animals, such as humans, that eat other animals.

Although controversy still rages over the health effects of PCBs, they cause a severe and often disfiguring skin disease, chloracne, and have been linked in one study to developmental problems in infants whose mothers regularly ate PCB-laden fish.

PCBs have also been linked to changes in liver function and, in the most hotly disputed animal test, to cancer.

Anti-PCB battle may include lowering level of Woods Pond

As part of its search for the most cost-effective way of dealing with contamination by PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — in the Housatonic River, General Electric Co. wants to arrange to drain as much water as possible from Woods Pond this fall.

Speaking at an interstate meeting Tuesday in Hartford on pollutants that cross state lines, Ronald F. Desgroseilliers, manager of environmental programs for GE in Pittsfield, said that could be done by leaving open the bypass channel at the Woods Pond plant of Kimberly-Clark Corp.'s Schweitzer division.

GE is evaluating the technical feasibility and cost-effectiveness of several potential PCB-cleanup methods for river areas between GE's plant and the Woods Pond dam where sediments contain more than 50 parts per million of toxic PCBs.

One option under investigation is dredging. Emptying Woods Pond would help the company determine how much contaminated sediment could be exposed for excavation rather than being scooped up underwater.

Dry excavation would reduce the risk that dredging would increase contamination in the Housatonic below Woods Pond by disturbing sediment, freeing it to float downstream.

Other options under study are leaving the sediment in place but sealing it off from the river with a covering such as gravel, rock or fly ash, and channeling the river around pockets of contamination.

A fourth option, always included in such studies as a touchstone, is doing nothing. But Desgroseilliers said that for GE, that option also would involve action — building a spillway at Woods Pond to prevent high water or storms from washing contaminated sediment downstream.

Under that option, he said, "you would use Woods Pond as a giant stabilization basin."

Natural trap

Earlier GE studies identified the backwaters of Woods Pond as a natural trap for PCB-laden sediments.

At this point, Desgroseilliers said, "that is the option I prefer."

But later in the same meeting, Environmental Protection Agency engineer Patricia Hynes, who is monitoring GE's compliance with a joint federal-state consent order mandating the study and cleanup work, stated a different preference.

"Dredging and disposal is the one I am most interested in," she said.

But the studies that will provide the basis for a choice have just begun. Desgroseilliers said GE's consultants will begin intensive examination of the options Oct. 1, looking at the technical aspects, environmental impact and cost of each, and the degree to which each one would accomplish the goal of protecting human health and the environment.

About 90 days later, he said, the company will present recommendations to the EPA and the state Department of Environmental Quality Engineering.

If the agencies approve those recommendations, he said, GE will start preliminary engineering work on the options that have survived the study process.