

Forum backs bacteria as anti-PCB weapon

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By Judy Katz

An innovative process using bacteria to break down molecules of toxic PCBs, polychlorinated biphenyls, is the people's choice for abating PCB contamination in Housatonic River sediments.

That was the clear consensus of speakers at last night's standing-room-only public forum at the Western Massachusetts Electric Co. auditorium to discuss General Electric Co.'s report on a different cleanup option — dredging up at least 243,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment from the river between the New Lenox Road bridge and the Woods Pond dam and burying it nearby or in Silver Lake.

But speakers also urged, as an interim measure, immediate repairs and construction of a spillway at Woods Pond dam to reduce sediment drift downriver and called for investigating a spot in October Mountain State Forest as a potential PCB burial ground.

Sponsored by EPA

The forum was sponsored by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Environmental Quality Engineering to present the fruit of three years' work before the public.

Under a joint federal-state order signed in 1981, GE studied contamination of the river by PCBs from its Pittsfield operations and narrowed a broad range of possible remedial actions down to dredging and three others: channeling the river around PCB hot spots, covering major pockets of contamination to immobilize the sediment, or — the minimal-action option — improving the Woods Pond dam.

The three other options will be discussed at later public meetings. "This is the start of the process," stressed state regional environmental engineer John Higgins.

He promised to come to Berkshire County "five nights a week for 25 weeks" if necessary to ensure that the public "will be as educated as you want to become so you can make your own judgment."

Patricia Hynes, the EPA engineer overseeing GE's compliance with the order, told the audience of about 75 that she has worked on this project for 2½ years. "I am dedicated to coming up with the best environmental solution," she said.

Tentatively, she said, that looks as if it could be the bacterial process patented by Detox Industries of Stafford, Texas. She said it is now officially a fifth option.

Need for investigation

She added that a great deal of investigation is needed to determine if it will work for the Housatonic River, if it is reliable and if it is free of undesirable side effects.

But later, after former Pittsfield mayor Remo Del Gallo echoed earlier speakers' hopes that the process will work, she interjected, "If you still pray, pray that this works."

Because the meeting followed the format of a formal state hearing, public officials were given the chance to speak first and monopolized the first hour after Ronald F. Desgroselliers, GE manager of environmental programs, explained the environmental ramifications of dredging and burial.

Speaker after speaker declared that the four burial sites that GE identified — Woods Pond on the Lee-Lenox line (use of which would



Susan Plageman
Patricia Hynes
Seeking best answer

require breaching the dam, eliminating the wetland and reducing the river to a channel), the Willow Creek marsh in Lenox between the railroad track and the river, a hillside on Post Farm and Silver Lake — were totally unacceptable.

Lenox Selectman George L. Darey told the officials to forget Post Farm, which is owned by Lenox. It is dedicated recreational land, he said, and to change that designation would take a two-thirds vote of a town meeting.

In Lenox, he said, "you're not going to get a two-thirds vote for motherhood."

'Waste of time'

Rep. Christopher J. Hodgkins, D-Lee, contended that dredging and burial are so unacceptable that GE might be putting it forward "tongue in cheek." Even holding a meeting to discuss it is a waste of time, he said.

Hynes disputed that. "I have learned a great deal from the people who live in this area," she

said, just from the private briefings for public officials that preceded last night's session.

"There may be more than one way to dredge," she said, suggesting that GE might be required to incorporate restorative measures so that Woods Pond and the wetlands would return, over a period of time, to their prior condition.

Referring to some of the after-effects of dredging shown in GE diagrams, she declared that "a crater, a straight-line trough, is not acceptable."

It was Darey who suggested looking at an area in October Mountain State Forest near a former Scout camp, Camp Eagle, as a burial site for sediment.

He said he had tried and failed to reach the selectmen of the affected town, Washington, before the meeting and apologized for his inability to consult them first.

For holding action

Sen. Peter C. Webber, R-Pittsfield, made the strongest pitch for changing GE's minimal-action option into an immediate holding action while studying more effective cleanup.

The Silver Lake burial site proposal was scored by Rep. Robert Frank Jakubowicz, D-Pittsfield, as something nearby residents should not have to tolerate.

Referring to statements in GE's analysis that it would involve three years of heavy construction activity in the middle of the city, considerable odors and dust, he said Silver Lake should be ruled out unequivocally.

Stephen F. Joyce, state deputy regional environmental engineer, broke in to ask if neighborhood residents want Silver Lake cleaned of the 63,000 pounds of PCBs it now holds. The response from those in the audience was a strong, "Yes, take it out."

He then warned that the same side effects would accompany a Silver Lake cleanup.

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