

River groups await peer panel's findings

By Jack Dew
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Though it is a quiet, somewhat bureaucratic moment in the prolonged battle over PCB contamination in the Housatonic River, a scientific review of a federal study of the pollution's effects on people is nonetheless a significant juncture in the running struggle over how large a cleanup will be done.

For three days last week, a

panel of seven experts met at Cranwell Resort in Lenox to discuss a human health risk assessment prepared by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The assessment found that people face a number of increased dangers from exposure to the PCB pollution in the Housatonic, including a significantly higher risk of cancer from eating fish or waterfowl that live in and along

the river.

Environmental advocates, GE and the EPA are now awaiting the panel's findings, which are expected to be issued within a month and will critique the EPA's study. It may suggest changes or further research; the EPA will respond to the findings but is not required to heed any of the recommendations.

Still, the report could play a sig-

nificant role in the future of the Housatonic, and will be a crucial piece of evidence upon which the EPA will rely when it decides how much of the river south of Pittsfield should be cleaned.

Under the terms of a settlement among the EPA, GE, the city of Pittsfield and seven additional state and federal agencies, two miles of river are being dredged

PCBS, continued on B4

B4 — The Berkshire Eagle, Wednesday, November 26, 2003

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A woman crosses over the Housatonic River on the footbridge at Woods Pond in Lenox on Monday. The effects of PCBs on humans and animals in the river south of Pittsfield are being analyzed by a peer review panel.

River groups await findings of peer panel

PCBS from B1

to remove the PCB contamination in the sediment and bank soil. That work is expected to be finished by 2006.

The settlement left undecided whether there will be any cleanup in the remaining 150 miles of Housatonic that stretch south from Pittsfield, through Connecticut and end at Long Island Sound. The EPA will decide within the next few years how much cleanup it believes is necessary. If it orders further remediation, GE will almost certainly appeal to a federal court, where the results of this peer review could be a significant piece of evidence that could demonstrate whether EPA has acted fairly or has stepped outside the bounds of accepted science.

A GE spokesman, Gary Sheffer, said yesterday that the company supports the peer review process, just as it supports the settlement agreement, and acknowledged the forthcoming report will be important.

"This is a very significant point in the process. There is a lot at stake and a lot of decisions are going to be based on it. It is the foundation for the rest of the process," he said.

Worst fears allayed

Prior to last week's meetings, several environmental advocates had quietly voiced concerns about some of the scientists chosen to sit on the panel. They felt some had close ties to GE and the

Ashley Falls will light village tree

SHEFFIELD — The Ashley Falls community will open the 2003 holiday season with hay wagon rides and the lighting of the 70-foot Norway spruce on the village green on Saturday, Dec. 6, rain or shine.

The hay wagon rides will begin at 4 near the post office on the green. Draft horses from Split Rail Ranch in Great Barrington

chemical industry and would bring an anti-EPA bias to the table. They also were concerned that all seven panelists had been nominated by GE or the EPA, and none of several candidates suggested by the public were chosen.

Those fears appear largely to have been dispelled by the meetings. Judy Herkimer of the Connecticut-based Housatonic Environmental Action League (HEAL), which has been pushing for a more aggressive study of the PCB pollution found in Connecticut, said she found the panel's deliberations to have been "thoughtful and intelligent."

"We did have concerns in the beginning, and I believe the industry apologists will be seated at most of these boards, in light of the current administration and the way that GE has been allowed to permeate regulatory agencies," Herkimer said in a telephone interview Monday.

"But in light of the obvious PCB contamination and the heightened risks that EPA has identified, it will be difficult for even industry apologists to come out" against the EPA in their comments, she said.

Tim Gray, executive director of the advocacy group Housatonic River Initiative, said he was encouraged by the rigorous approach of the seven panelists and felt his group was given a fair hearing.

Gray said he hoped the panelists' discussions will result in a risk assessment that will bolster the conclusion that the PCBs are harmful to people along the river, which could lead to a more thorough cleanup.

HEAL and Housatonic River Initiative both hope that the scientists will recommend changes in the EPA study that would make the risk from the pollution appear even greater.

Among the possible alterations they want to see would be an approach that would take into account higher-than-normal PCB

concentrations detected in the blood of people living along the Housatonic, possibly putting them at higher risk from continued exposure. And they would like further investigation of the pollution in Connecticut, where there is a shallow pool of data that has been relied upon to determine that the pollution there is neither as heavy nor widespread as in Massachusetts.

On the other side is GE, which hopes that the panelists will find the EPA's methods were wrong and led to conclusions that exaggerated the threat of PCBs to people.

On the first day of the meetings, GE sent four scientists to address the panel. They made a variety of arguments, attacking the methods used to estimate how much fish people might eat from the river and to question even the assumption that PCBs can cause cancer, saying there is "little credible evidence" that workers exposed to the chemical while on the job have been harmed and that there is "virtually no credible evidence" that environmental PCB pollution leads to cancer in people.

That argument cuts against more than two decades of government regulations; the federal government banned PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, in 1977, declaring them a probable cause of cancer in people. Studies since have suggested the chemical can cause other problems, as well, like reduced intelligence in children who were exposed to PCBs in the womb.

GE is not predicting the outcome of the peer review. Sheffer said: "All you can do is go in and make your best arguments and do it in a professional way, and then hope that the power of your arguments will win the day. That's what we tried to do, and now it is up to the peer reviewers to do their job."

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