

Cleanup challenged

■ The EPA demands that GE find ways to remove PCBs from the Housatonic River without harming its 'unique character.'

By Jack Dew
Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD — After months of delay, federal regulators have responded to General Electric's proposed cleanup of the Housatonic River, demanding a plan that tackles the river's heavy PCB pollution while protecting its sensitive habitat and endangered species.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

sent its 39-page letter to GE yesterday, nearly six months after it received the company's proposal for the stretch of Housatonic known as the "rest of river" — running from the confluence of the east and west branches in Pittsfield, through South County to the Derby Dam in Connecticut.

"Cleaning up the portions of the Housatonic River south of Pittsfield is one of the most significant environmental challenges for this generation of New Englanders," said Robert W. Varney, regional administrator of EPA's New England office in an announcement yesterday afternoon.

While it will be "complicated and challenging" to remove PCBs from the river while protecting its "aesthetic and recreational values," Varney

said, "we can all agree that we need to do this work and get it right."

Among the 150 changes it sought, the EPA is asking GE to create a phased plan that would allow for revisions if future advances yield better ways to clean the river. And it wants GE to identify where a dump might be located near the river; to revisit alternatives to a landfill; and to consider using trains instead of trucks to move the waste.

The agency told GE that its proposal "failed to recognize the unique character of the Housatonic River," and said the cleanup must avoid or minimize harm to "sensitive areas and

CLEANUP, continued on A4

EPA challenges GE cleanup

CLEANUP from A1

restore the river and floodplain to its current character to the greatest extent possible."

GE spokesman Peter O'Toole said the company had received the EPA's response and was digging into it yesterday. "Both [EPA and GE] and all the stakeholders — including the commonwealth — just need to work collaboratively on the next steps forward," he said.

GE has until Dec. 9 to submit its answer. Given the length and breadth of the EPA's demands, however, it is likely the company will ask for an extension. Once GE responds, EPA will evaluate the proposal and then issue a cleanup order, which could come next spring.

EPA's response drew early raves from environmentalists, community groups, and state and local officials who had challenged GE's proposal.

"My initial reaction is that EPA has really listened to the concerns of Berkshire County residents," said Eleanor Tillinghast of Green Berkshires. "[EPA] is saying slow down, go back and reconsider the alternatives."

Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs Ian Bowles — who in June asked the EPA to delay its letter so the state could discuss its concerns — said those concerns have been addressed.

"I commend Administrator Varney for the action he has taken today," Bowles said. "He has clearly taken to heart all of the substantive and procedural issues raised by our agencies. The commonwealth's interest is in seeing all the alternatives studied thoroughly before deciding on a remedy, and this decision puts us on a path to doing just that."

Stretches of the Housatonic are heavily polluted with PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, that GE used for decades at its Pittsfield plant. The federal government banned the chemical in 1977, declaring it a probable cause of cancer, but the toxin had already spilled, leaked or been dumped into the Housatonic and its banks.

In 2000, GE, the EPA, Pittsfield, and several additional state and federal agencies finalized a settlement that requires GE to pay for most of the cleanup. PCBs have already been removed from the

first two miles of river.

The settlement required GE to propose a potential cleanup for the rest of river but gives the EPA the power to make the final decision.

GE's proposal called for dredging the first five miles of the river south of Fred Garner River Park on Pomeroy Avenue and laying a thin layer of sand over the next five miles and Woods Pond, on the Lee and Lenox town line.

GE also proposed digging up 38 acres of polluted land in the river's floodplain and installing a landfill near the Housatonic that would store 227,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil and sediment. The entire project would cost roughly \$184 million, according to the company's estimates.

But, given the EPA's hefty response yesterday, there is little chance that GE's plan will become reality. It remains to be seen, however, how much further the EPA will go, and whether different methods will be used.

Critics had blasted GE's plan, saying it failed to use any new technology to tackle the pollution and would destroy the delicate habitat along the river. They feared the result would be a sterilized channel running through South County, where the fish would still be inedible and children still couldn't swim.

More than 30 citizen groups, town agencies and environmental organizations formed a new group, the Housatonic Clean River Coalition, to attack the plan and call for a better, more innovative approach. Another group, Save the Housatonic, is seeking a special designation for the river and its watershed that could give the state a greater say in the cleanup.

Tad Ames, president of the Berkshire Natural Resources Council and a member of Save the Housatonic, said he was encouraged by the EPA's response.

"It's far too early to draw any firm conclusions, but I do get the sense that the EPA has been listening to the public," he said. "Or perhaps this is where they were headed all along."

Tim Gray, executive director of the Housatonic River Initiative, was equally encouraged. "But the real proof in the pudding will be when the EPA actually orders GE to do a cleanup. Most of GE's plan [right now] doesn't get us to a swimmable, fishable river."