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Four area sites proposed for placing PCB sediments

By Judy Katz

Four sites — two in Lenox, one on the Lee-Lenox line and one in Pittsfield — were proposed for disposing of PCB-contaminated Housatonic River sediments at a briefing for area legislators yesterday at the Statehouse in Boston.

They include two tentatively identified earlier, Silver Lake on General Electric Co. property and a section of Woods Pond. The third, according to a summary distributed at the briefing conducted by GE executives, is the Willow Creek backwater basin, a large swamp near the river north of the former Lenox landfill. The fourth is an upland area near Willow Creek on the 250-acre Post Farm owned by the town of Lenox.

Rep. Robert Frank Jakubowicz, D-Pittsfield, and Rep. Christopher J. Hodgkins, D-Lee, attended the two-hour session arranged by the state Department of Environmental Quality Engineering and the federal Environmental Protection Agency. They emerged, they said, "very concerned."

The briefing for legislators representing the affected area — the stretch of river between GE's Pittsfield plant and Woods Pond on the Lee-Lenox line — was the first of a series that will culminate in a public meeting Nov. 7 in Pittsfield. Private briefings at GE for elected officials from Lenox and Lee are scheduled Monday and Tuesday and one for Pittsfield officials on Nov. 5.

"I came out of the hearing gravely concerned," Hodgkins said. "My responsibility is to sit down and investigate the environmental factors very closely."

He added that he will solicit help from environmental experts, such as professors from the University of Massachusetts and Simon's Rock of Bard College.

Jakubowicz said he wants to be sure that any sediment resting-place selected is completely safe. And, he said, the effect on traffic of moving dredged sediment is a major factor.

The legislators said they were told that moving the quantity of sediment to be excavated, if dredging and removal is the river cleanup option that is selected, would require dispatching nine large trucks an hour five days a week for seven months each year for three years.

GE, in compliance with a joint state-federal order, is studying the costs and benefits of dredging and three other, less complete, methods of alleviating river pollution caused by toxic PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, as they are more formally called.

About 20 tons of PCBs are trapped in sediment in that stretch of the Housatonic River. They are the legacy of 40 years in which GE used PCBs as a component of a premium grade of transformer insulating fluid. GE stopped using PCBs in 1977, two years before a federal ban took effect.

The other three pollution-abatement options would not involve removing massive amounts of sediment. They are channeling the river around the most contaminated

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areas, covering pockets of contamination to prevent PCBs from moving downstream and doing nothing except building a spillway at the Woods Pond dam to reduce the movement of sediment during storms or high water.

Ronald F. Desgroseilliers, manager of environmental programs for GE in Pittsfield, conducted yesterday's briefing after an introduction by Stephen F. Joyce, hazardous waste section chief for the Department of Environmental Quality Engineering's western region.

No decisions yet

Jakubowicz said Joyce stressed that no decisions have yet been made. The state and federal environmental agencies are holding the series of meetings so area officials and residents can help evaluate the options.

Dredging is the only option that would physically remove contamination from the river. When PCBs are in the river, they can piggyback downstream on soil particles and enter the food chain by accumulating in the fat of fish and aquatic animals. But once removed, the sediment must be deposited in a secure place that guarantees life imprisonment for the PCB molecules.

According to the summary, each of the four sites could be converted into a PCB prison. Two, Woods Pond and Silver Lake, already hold large deposits of PCB-laden sediment.

The special characteristics of each one will be examined in detail in a future GE report, the summary stated. The report discussed yesterday, identifying the site candidates, was termed an interim study "to provide a framework" for weighing the feasibility and desirability of dredging.

"This report is the first of several which will be prepared to address various aspects of this remedial option as well as other remedial options," the summary stated.

It recapped information about proposed dredging techniques that GE had discussed at earlier public meetings in Connecticut.

To keep stirred-up sediment from carrying PCBs to new locations during dredging, the company said, it would be necessary to drain off the water to expose as much of the material as possible for dry excavation.

Lowering water level

"We suggest that the water level at the Schweitzer dam . . . be lowered by bypassing or eliminating the dam," the summary said. Once the sediment-removal job is complete, the Woods Pond area could be allowed to refill. But, the summary continued, "it is not clear whether that would be necessary or beneficial."

Before any work can be done, a myriad of permits must be obtained from federal, state and local governmental agencies. Because so many regulations are involved, the company estimated that the project would take six years — and that estimate, it added, is optimistic.

The interim report also lists environmental problems that could accompany dredging, such as disrupting wildlife, destroying wetlands and reducing flood storage.

Also present at the briefing, Jakubowicz said, were Patricia Hynes, the Environmental Protection Agency engineer in charge of monitoring GE's compliance with the joint order; John J. Higgins, regional environmental engineer for the state agency; James H. Thayer, an environmental manager at Pittsfield GE; Robert S. Friedman, environmental programs manager from GE's Fairfield, Conn., headquarters, and William Bouck, an engineer with the consulting firm of Blaisland & Bouck that prepared the report for GE.