Consultant: Old Plant Sites Threaten Hudson PCB Cleanup

MICHAEL HILL Associated Press Writer — November 10, 2009
ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Widespread subterranean contamination along the upper Hudson River could threaten the massive effort to dredge the river clean of PCBs, according to an environmental consultant.

Government regulators and General Electric Co. disputed the contention, first reported in the new issue of Harper's Magazine, that PCB contamination seeping into the upper river could be heavy enough to erase results of the $700 million-plus federal Superfund project designed to remove contaminated sediment downriver. The first phase of the planned 40-mile dredge project wrapped up last month.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are considered probable carcinogens. General Electric plants in Fort Edward and neighboring Hudson Falls discharged wastewater containing PCBs for decades before the lubricant and coolant was banned in 1977.

The existence of underground contamination at the two old GE sites has long been known. But Walter Hang, an Ithaca, N.Y.-based environmental consultant cited by the magazine, claims the threat of leaks from the sites is greater than generally acknowledged.

"The danger is that the dredged areas will simply get re-contaminated in the years to come if the sources on land are not removed," he said in a recent interview with The Associated Press.

GE spokesman Mark Behan said measurements at Fort Edward, downriver from the old GE plants, show less than an ounce of PCBs leaking into the river a day, down from five pounds a day in the early '90s.

"There are remedies in place and working at every place that PCBs have been identified," Behan said.

The Harper's article claims water monitoring systems on the Hudson fail to catch heavier-than-water PCBs just above the river bottom.

Dr. David Carpenter, who directs the Institute for Health and the Environment of the State University of New York at Albany, agreed that water column measurements wouldn't catch bottom-hugging PCBs.

But Carpenter, a longtime dredging advocate, also said Monday that the upriver leaks are minute compared to the massive volume of PCBs to be dredged. He said any claim that the leaks would nullify the effects of dredging is "nonsense."

Efforts to stem the leak of PCBs into the river have been undertaken by GE and overseen by the state Department of Environmental Conservation. Earlier this year, a system of tunnels went online 80 feet below the river at Hudson Falls to drain away underground contaminants. DEC engineering geologist Kevin Farrar said regulators will know how well the system is working next year.

Hang contends that data show toxins stretching beyond the reach of the Hudson Falls tunnel system.

But Farrar said the Hudson Falls tunnels' "capture zone" will extend far enough — if not now, then with the addition of more drains, if needed. He said there was no evidence of major PCB leakage into the river.

"To say there's a large significant source of PCBs in the Hudson River from the plant sites does not reflect the current state of the earth up there," Farrar said. "That's simply not what's going on."

Source URL (retrieved on *03/09/2014 - 6:29pm*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2009/11/consultant-old-plant-sites-threaten-hudson-pcb-cleanup