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PCB would stay in river for years

By CHAT BLAKEMAN

HUDSON FALLS — Even if General Electric were to immediately cease discharging the chemical PCB into the Hudson River, it could take years before traces of it disappear, a spokesman for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said today.

Dr. Ernest Regan, who heads the compliance division of EPA's regional office, said the chemical has entered sediment on the river bottom and would "continue to create problems," even if no additional amounts were discharged.

The unexpectedly high level of PCB's in fish taken from the river prompted the State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the State Department of Health last week to warn consumers not to eat striped bass taken from the river and to limit their consumption of other species to one serving per week.

General Electric, which is under government order to reduce its discharges to several ounces a day, within the next two years, is believed to be the major source of the chemical in the river.

"The sediment containing PCBs will last a considerable period of time," Regan said. "Even if GE were to stop discharging tomorrow, it would continue to create problems."

PCB, the common name for polychlorinated biphenyl, is stable compound which scientists report does not break down easily. In this respect, it is similar to DDT.

Although PCB is known to be toxic, it's precise effect on human life has not been determined. Regan said he did not know if the PCB in the sediment would continue to pose an immediate threat to aquatic life. "It's an unknown quality," he said.

He said dredging the river would not be feasible because it would stir up the sediment and possibly increase the diffusion of PCB into the water. He said there was a possibility the sediment had been covered enough to prevent its diffusion, but he termed the possibility highly unlikely.

Regan said EPA was bound by the terms of a contract with the company and would not seek to hasten the schedule for reducing the discharges. He said it was possible the state, working through the Department of Environmental Conservation, could take such steps, however.

DEC Commissioner Ogden Reid said last week he would like to see the discharge eliminated entirely.

Regan said the company had made a "tremendous effort" to reduce the amount of PCB discharges, but added the government wanted them reduced further. "We've told them it's primarily a matter of housekeeping and isolating the wastes," he said.

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