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Nature May Rescue River

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A coalition of oysters, clams, cattails and marsh grasses may soon come to the rescue of the Hudson River in an effort to remove PCB pollutants from the river's sediments and waters.

Environmeatal Conservation Commissioner Ogden Reid said Thursday that the state would set up a pilot program utilizing biological organisms to remove PCB's from the Hudson River between Glens Falls and Troy. In recent weeks Reid has warned the public not to eat any fish taken from the Hudson River because of the unsafe pollution levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCB's found in fish sampled throughout the region. Reid has also announced he will seek to halt the discharge of these toxic organic chemicals by the General Electric Company into the upper Hudson at a public hearing set for Oct. 6.

The pilot program is based on a proposal by Dr. Edgar W. Garbisch, the president and director of Environmental Concern, a non-profit organization specializing in finding biological solutions to pollution problems.

"The PCB problem has just emerged, so there really is not much of a track record regarding ways to solve the problems caused by contamination of this chemical," Dr. Garbisch said this morning in a telephone interview from his home in St. Michaels, Md. "But I believe that this biological approach offers one of the most promising possibilities for removing pesticides, heavy metals and organic pollutants such as PCB's from the Hudson River."

He said marsh grasses, sedges and a variety of shellfish have the ability to absorb PCB's and other pollutants from water and sediments. "Shellfish are filter feeders and as such pump large quantities of water through their systems," he explained. "In the process of filtering the water through their bodies, they concentrate many of these pollutants in their fatty tissues."

He said marsh grasses have the same ability and concentrate these toxic chemicals in tissues containing large quantities of fat, such as seeds.

"Since these plants are perennials, the plants can be harvested of their fatty tissues each year without permanently damaging the plants," he said. "And in general shellfish have the ability to purge their systems of toxic substances when they are removed from a contaminated environment and placed into fresh water. We might be able to keep on recycling shellfish, without any damage to them as well."

Dr. Garbisch said this biological approach to solving PCB contamination is still experimental and conceivably might not be effective for solving large-scale pollution problems. "We simply do not know," he said.

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