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MAR 1 4 1976

Hudson for Drinking Water . . . A Closer Look

By Jon Powers

NEW YORK CITY —The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has conceded that it will have to "look more closely at the water quality" of the Hudson River before determining whether large quantities of drinking water can be withdrawn to meet the needs of the growing New York metropolitan region.

A Corps spokesman has acknowledged that river contamination by poly-chlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) is one danger that will have to be considered before any decision is made to utilize the Hudson River for drinking water supplies.

Environmental Conservation Commissioner Ogden Reid signed an order on Feb. 25 banning most commercial fishing in the Hudson River because of dangerously high levels of PCB's found in many species of fish. Exceedingly high levels of the chemical substance have been found in fish caught at both Kingston and Poughkeepsie.

According to the Northeastern United States Water Supply Study interim report, one possible method of obtaining additional water is to locate a pumping station on the river at West Park, between Kingston and Poughkeepsie. Another alternative would be to locate a pumping station at Hyde Park in Dutchess County.

Frank McGowan, director of the Corps study, told the Freeman that further studies will be made to determine whether PCB's pose a threat to the river's use as a source for drinking water.

"We are going to have to look more closely at the water quality," said McGowan, "we are aware that there was a PCB problem when we were working on the study. We were also aware that there is good quality water in that section of the river . . . we certainly don't intend to neglect the PCB problem and we are going to consider it."

At present, six Mid-Hudson municipalities or facilities withdraw water from the Hudson for drinking purposes, including Port Ewen, Highland, Rhinebeck, Poughkeepsie, the Marist Brothers Monastery in the Town of Esopus and the Hudson River State Hospital in Dutchess County.

In March, the Ulster County health Department took samples of river water from Highland, Port Ewen and the Marist Monastery and found that PCB concentrations were below acceptable levels. Similar samples have been taken from the Poughkeepsie water supply, with much the same results.

PCB's are heavier than water, and therefore collect in the silt and sediment on the river bottom, where they are often ingested by fish. McGowan said that an intake chamber located at West Park could be designed to skim water from the surface of the river, where PCB's would be less concentrated.

In addition, PCB's have an extremely long residual life and are virtually indestructable by artificial means. At present, there is no known way of removing the PCB's that have accumulated over the years in the Hudson River.

McGowan emphasized that the Corps has not made a commitment to the West Park project. "We have not established whether we will proceed with that particular project," he said, "we will assess the position of those individual citizens who appear at the hearing (March 19 in New York City) and then determine whether there is a strong or official demand for the Corps to address, with specific programs, the water supply needs of the Northeast."

It was Congress, in 1965, that authorized the Corps of Engineers to undertake a study concerning the water supply needs of the Northeast region. For the New York metropolitan area, the Corps study lists five possible areas of development; three include a water intake facility at West Park (estimated cost: $2 billion) and two include a similar facility at Hyde Park.

The possibility that some potential sources of water may not be acceptable because of pollution was raised in the Corps' interim report. The report noted that water taken from certain polluted estuaries (such as the Hudson) could be treated in a conventional water treatment plant before it is fed into the distribution system.

The report added, however, that existing conventional treatment plants may not be adequate to treat highly polluted water.

". . . This method involves certain public health risks," the report stated, "it may be acceptable to live with these risks for limited periods of time in an emergency, but not for longer periods."