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State Drafts a Plan To Rid the Hudson Of PCB 'Hot Spots'

By E. J. DIONNE Jr.

New York State's Commissioner of Environmental Conservation, Peter A.A. Berle, yesterday announced a $25 million plan to start a cleanup of the Hudson River of PCB contamination.

Mr. Berle said he would seek Federal funds for the projects, which will involve the dredging of between 30 and 40 "hot spots" in the Hudson— areas of large concentrations of PCB's. His remarks came at a news conference at the New York Academy of Sciences meeting at the New York Hilton.

PCB's, polychlorinated biphenyls, have been associated with a variety of birth defects, cancer in laboratory animals and skin disorders.

Acts Against 2 G.E. Plants

In 1975, the state took action against two General Electric plants for discharging the chemicals into the river and reached a $7 million settlement under which General Electric paid for PCB research and for the construction of a waste-treatment facility.

But the state now estimates the total cost of cleaning the river or PCB's will run to over $200 million and it is unlikely that the total sum will ever be appropriated.

According to Mr. Berle, dredging the "hot spots" would remove about 50 percent of all the PCB's embedded at the river bottom, and about 75 percent of those in the section of the river between Troy and Fort Edward, where the concentration is heaviest.

"Fishing in the upper Hudson has stopped entirely. Unless we do this work, we'll never be able to reopen the fisheries in the foreseeable future," Mr. Berle said.

But Mr. Berle said that he felt spending the entire $200 million to clean the

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Plan for PCB Pollution Is Drafted

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river did nor appear to be "cost effective."

Mr. Berle's announcement resolved not only the question of how much the state intended to spend, but also the issue of what was the best way to clean up the PCB's.

Environmentalists and others had feared that dredging would cause severe environmental damage.

But Dr. John Sanders, chairman of the State's PCB Settlement Advisory Committee and a professor of Geology at Barnard College, said that several years of study had indicated, to the surprise of many committee members, that it was "possible to conduct a dredging operation with minimal environmental impact."

The New York State Department of Transportation, which already does dredging as part of its work to maintain the state's canal system, cooperated with the Environmental Conservation Department in studying how dredging would affect the environment.

Mr. Berle said he had been in contact with Federal officials on the possibility of receiving aid, but declined to predict what chances the state had of winning the $25 million. Since the problem of P.C.B. contamination is widespread, he said, there was hope the Federal Government might look upon the Hudson River proposal as an experimental or demonstration project.

The problem of PCB contamination has been an emotional and politically difficult question since it first arose several years ago.

At the time of New York State's initial negotiations with General Electric, the company had threatened to move out of New York if the state pressed for too much in damages.

Company Gains Support

The company won sympathy from some members of the Carey administration, notably Commerce Commissioner John S. Dyson, who argued that high environmental standards would place the company at a competitive disadvantage with other corporations.

But environmental groups charged that the costs of cleaning up the river would run to much higher than the $7 million the state eventually got.

Sarah Chasis, a senior staff attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said that the latest estimates supported the earlier claims by environmentalists, but added that her group and others involved in the PCB issue supported Mr. Berle's proposal and had been satisfied that dredging the river would be environmentally sound.

She added that since the Federal Government had first issued the permit allowing General Electric to dump PCB's it "has a responsibility" to help the state clean up the damage that had ensued.