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Landfills damaging river

This is the second of three articles about pollution in the Hudson River.

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The General Electric Company stopped dumping PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) into the Hudson River on July 1st.

The Monsanto Chemical Corp., the country's sole manufacturer of the toxic industrial chemical, is planning to halt all national production of the substance on Oct. 31.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will prohibit the discharges of this long-lived organic compound into all waterways after next Feb. 2.

The PCB problem must be over. Right? Wrong.

Officials at both the EPA and the state Department of Environmental Conservation acknowledge the problem is far from over. It may be getting worse.

At least 12 landfills throughout New York state are known to be leaching PCBs into the environment, according to Russell M. Plesant, director of the state's Bureau of Monitoring and Surveillance.

The state's Division of Pure Waters reports "Millions of pounds of PCBs lie in state in their capacitor coffins in the Ft. Edward landfill, already beginning to migrate in the leachate as rusting releases them. In contrast, the Hudson River sediment may contain about 500,000 pounds of PCBs in total."

Tests by the EPA last December found surprisingly high contamination levels of PCB's as far south as Westchester County. Among the more highly contaminated areas were shallow bays near the Tappan Zee Bridge, Foundry Cove near Cold Spring, Saugerties, and near Albany.

The EPA estimates during the next few decades, the amount of PCBs in the environment will increase by 3½ times — from current estimates of 150 million pounds to 540 million pounds. Even throwing out carbonless carbon paper releases PCB into the environment.

General Electric has agreed to halt the PCB dumping, and also to contribute \$4

million towards restoration of the Hudson — a quarter of that for research, and the rest a lump sum damages payment.

Most of the research will be on how to restore the upper Hudson.

The Department of Environmental Conservation will kick in \$3 million for restoration costs, once the best course is decided.

There are supposedly 458,000 pounds of PCBs in the upper Hudson alone, and it may cost as much as \$30 million to remove them.

"If that's the case, I feel the money should be spent to do it," said Dr. Leo Hetting, director of the Bureau of Water Research. "After all, we have spent billions constructing sewage treatment plants. Can't we spend \$20 million, if need be, to restore the Hudson?"

Hetting thinks the state "should have a pretty good handle on what we should do" by 1978.

Dredging, seen as the leading contender for removing the heavily-contaminated sediments from the upper Hudson, gained favor as a method after a previous brainstorm to let fish "harvest" the PCBs fell through.

Fish concentrate PCBs in their tissues to such a great extent that state officials thought it might be possible to remove PCBs by simply capturing enough contaminated fish.

"But we found for every 10 pounds of PCBs you would remove, you'd have to harvest one million pounds of fish," Hetting said. "Then you'd have to figure out what to do with the fish."

Tragically, it was a decision made by the Department of Environmental Conservation that may have caused contaminated sediment to move into the lower Hudson River.

In the early 1970's, the Niagara Mohawk Power Corp. asked both the state and the Federal Power Commission for permission to remove a 500-foot-long dam across the Hudson at Fort Edward which had been used to generate hydroelectric power.

Both agencies agreed. "It was a real blunder," Dr. Hetting

said. "They blew up the dam and much of the sediment behind the dam began to move downstream. It was extremely contaminated with PCBs."

The situation wasn't helped when a spring flood in 1976 washed more sediment over the Federal Dam at Troy.

Other, more exotic possibilities besides dredging are being considered.

One is the use of activated carbon, which has the ability to absorb PCBs.

Battelle-Northwest Laboratories of Richland, Wash. is currently using activated carbon to remove Kepone, another highly toxic organic chemical, from the James River in Virginia. Battelle has suggested using a belt-type system, pulled behind a barge, to absorb the PCBs from the sediment.

This technique has been practical so far only in removing PCBs from municipal water supplies.

One of the most intriguing possibilities involves the use of discarded automobile tires.

According to one engineering company, old shredded tires are capable of absorbing heavy metals from stormwater runoff.

Since discarded tires are readily available in large quantities, the idea seems an economic one.

NEXT: Legal pollution