

Costly Superfund dredging set for Hudson River

May 9 2009, By MICHAEL HILL , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- People look funny at David Mathis when he takes a dip off his dock in the Hudson River. Health officials have long warned people not to eat fish caught from this slow-flowing stretch south of the Adirondacks and swimming here is unthinkable to many.

The reason: tons of oily PCBs - probable carcinogens - have been packed in with the river mud so heavily that the federal government named the river a Superfund site in 1984. Environmentalists and local residents like Mathis say the only way to rid the river of PCBs is to dredge out 1.8 million cubic yards of contaminated mud - a job that could take six years and cost far more than \$100 million a year. Opponents along the river are just as adamant that the river is cleaning itself and that dredging will be a gigantic folly.

The argument has gone on for a generation.

Metal scoops are set to be lowered from barges this month and chomp out the first loads of river bottom in one of the largest and most complex federal Superfund cleanups ever. The dredging will be paid for and coordinated by [General Electric](#) Co.

A thin stretch of river around Fort Edward, 10 miles north of Mathis' dock, will be jammed with an armada of boats scraping away at the river bottom night and day, six days a week. A multimillion dollar, 114-acre treatment site built by GE will treat the contaminated mud and pump the clean water back into the river; the processed mud will be shipped to

Texas for disposal.

"I've got a couple of kids. I don't have any grandkids yet," Mathis, 61, says as he pilots his 32-foot boat along the contaminated run of river. "But when I do, I want them to be able to swim in the river."

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, were commonly used as coolants and lubricants in transformers before they were banned in 1977. Considered a probable carcinogen, they have been linked to immune, reproductive and nervous-system problems.

Over several decades before the ban, GE plants in Fort Edward and neighboring Hudson Falls discharged wastewater containing more than a million pounds of PCBs into the river. A dam at Fort Edward kept the PCBs largely bottled up. But when the dam was removed in 1973, the chemicals flowed all the way to river's mouth at New York City, concentrating along a 40-mile stretch down to Albany.

New York state environmental officials considered dredging in the mid '70s, but had trouble finding a spot to bury the contaminated mud. With the Superfund site listing in 1984, the federal Environmental Protection Agency acquired broad powers to force the cleanup on GE. The EPA initially decided against a cleanup, citing technical challenges, but reconsidered in the '90s.

What followed was a decade on the river that had the air of a political campaign. Neighbors in Fort Edward placed pro- or anti-dredging signs on their front laws. Heated arguments broke out at public meetings.

GE, on the hook for the massive cleanup cost, waged an aggressive media campaign against dredging. One typical newspaper ad said dredging would "disrupt life on the river for years, and there's no guarantee it will work."

Jack Welch, then GE's top executive, was especially outspoken. He even argued with a nun at a shareholders' meeting, telling her: "... there is no correlation between PCB levels and cancer, Sister."

While federal officials have stopped short of saying PCBs cause cancer, the Department of Health and Human Services says PCBs may reasonably be anticipated to be carcinogens.

GE found local allies. Many residents feared dredging would turn a quiet stretch of river into rumbling, klieg-lit construction site. Tim Haven, longtime president of the anti-dredging group CEASE, says he'll give the project "a fair shake," but still believes a full dredging could take more than 15 years and will kick up PCBs into the river.

"I have a suspicion, or a gut feeling, this baby not going to go as well as planned," Haven said.

The EPA called for dredging in 2002. The start date was pushed back several years as the sides haggled over details and legal issues. Under a GE and EPA agreement, 265,000 cubic yards of river bottom - or about 15 percent of the total - will be dredged this year under Phase 1. The results will be studied before the start of Phase 2, the final and much larger stage.

Still in federal court is a suit by down-river towns concerned about whether dredging will stir up the PCBs and contaminate their drinking water. But EPA spokeswoman Kristen Skopeck said the project is scheduled to start sometime mid- to late-May.

Twelve dredgers, using clamshell-like scoops, will scrape up to 5,000 cubic yards a day, a bite at a time. Operations manager Tim Kruppenbacher said every effort is being made to keep light and noise to a minimum, but acknowledges "you're going to hear us."

Toxic muck will be barged about a mile up the Champlain Canal to the sprawling cleanup facility. Muck will be offloaded, processed, piped and dewatered. Water will be filtered again and again until it can go back in the canal. The pressed and dried toxic sludge cake will be shipped by rail to a Texas burial ground.

There are bigger Superfund projects that are expected to cost more to clean. But GE spokesman Mark Behan said there is likely none so complex.

"What's different is the unprecedented logistics," said GE spokesman Mark Behan, "the scale of it."

The EPA estimates that the project will cost GE around \$750 million. GE is not providing its own cost estimate.

Phase 1 of the work will continue through the fall.

Then comes the potential catch.

GE has yet to agree to perform Phase 2 - the vast majority of the cleanup over some 35 miles. GE reserved the right to review Phase 1 results before making a commitment. In a recent Securities and Exchange Commission filing, GE noted blandly that after the peer review "we may be responsible for further costs."

Environmentalists - who have fought GE so bitterly for so long - remain suspicious that the company will find a rationale to stop dredging after this year. But even if GE bows out, EPA could continue with Phase 2 and seek to recoup triple costs from GE. "No matter what," said Skopect, "we will complete this project."

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On the Net:

<http://www.epa.gov/udson/>

<http://www.hudsondredging.com/>

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