

Phase 1 of PCB removal on Hudson wrapping up

October 11 2009, By MICHAEL HILL , Associated Press Writer



In this photo made Wednesday, Oct. 7, 2009, crews dredge a stretch of the Hudson River in Fort Edward, N.Y. Dredging began in May after decades of argument over how to deal with tons of PCBs that flowed down the river after a dam here was removed. General Electric plants in Fort Edward and neighboring Hudson Falls discharged wastewater containing PCBs for decades before the popular lubricant was banned in 1977. (AP Photo/Mike Groll)

(AP) -- Crews dredging a polluted stretch of the upper Hudson River this year battled high water, old logging debris and unexpected levels of PCB contamination that slowed progress.

But as the first phase of one of the most costliest and complex federal Superfund projects wraps up this month, regulators say results are generally positive and show dredging can work. They are already

preparing for a far more expansive second phase, which would clean up 40 miles of river and likely push total project costs over \$700 million.

"We took on Mother Nature. She threw everything at us but the kitchen sink, from timber, to boats that were sunk, to tree branches," said George Pavlou, acting regional administrator for the [Environmental Protection Agency](#). "We prevailed in the end."

Dredging began in the rural area in May after decades of argument over how to deal with tons of PCBs that flowed down the river in 1973 after a dam was removed. Upriver General Electric plants in Fort Edward and neighboring Hudson Falls discharged wastewater containing PCBs for decades before the popular lubricant and coolant was banned in 1977. PCBs, or polychlorinated vinyls, are considered probable carcinogens.

Under an agreement between General Electric and the EPA, the company paid the cost of dredging concentrated pockets of PCBs this year about 40 miles north of Albany. GE treated the toxic waste at a nearby "dewatering" plant and shipped the dried remains by rail to a landfill some 1,700 miles away in Texas.

Crews managed to dredge 10 of 18 PCB "hot spots" targeted this year. They removed more than 240,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment, but expect to fall shy of the original target of 265,000 cubic yards when dredging ends mid-month.

Progress was slowed because contamination was often deeper and more concentrated than expected. In some areas, crews removed 60 to 80 percent more sediment than expected, said GE spokesman Mark Behan. In particular, contaminated debris left over from the old Adirondack logging industry complicated work.

"There was substantially more wood debris than expected, and the wood

debris at the bottom of the river made it impossible for the sampling to determine the depth of the contaminated sediment," Behan said.

It's still not clear if the eight unfinished hot spots will be cleaned up next year or rolled into Phase 2, which the EPA wants to start in 2011.

Barges will start leaving the river in the coming weeks. Results of the work will be analyzed by General Electric, the EPA and an independent panel of experts with an eye toward making improvements for the next phase, which could take five years.

The overriding question before the work began was whether dredging would be a cure worse than the disease. Opponents feared dredging would kick up contaminated silt and spike pollution levels in the river.

Two monitoring stations downriver have detected cumulative levels of PCBs above EPA standards. Also, the federal agency's thresholds for PCB "resuspension" in the water were exceeded twice, causing a temporary shutdown of work in August and a partial shutdown in September. There also were more than 90 instances when PCB levels in the air exceeded standards, likely from dredged sediment piled on barges or at the facility. Crews changed handling and operating procedures to reduce air releases.

The work - involving tugs, barges and dredging scoops suspended from cranes - got louder than desired sometimes. More than half of the 33 complaints by residents were noise-related. Five were about the smell.

Tim Havens, longtime president of the anti-dredging group CEASE, cited the shortcomings in calling the dredging a "miserable failure."

"They set the natural recovery of the river back for decades," he said.

But other locals welcomed the industrial armada, either out of belief in dredging or the stimulus effect of more than 250 local jobs.

"It's not bad at all, " Valerie Iuliucci said as she wrote up the lunch special on a board outside Jim's Broadway Cafe, in clear sight of a dredging barge. She said dredging crews have been a boon to the business.

"They all come in here at lunch time," she said.

Though GE spent \$629 million related to PCBs from 1990 through this spring, it has yet to agree to pay for Phase 2. Behan said the company will make a decision after the Phase 1 data is analyzed and the EPA determines the scope of what it wants for the next phase. If GE declines, the EPA still has options under Superfund law to make sure the work is done.

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