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GLOBE EDITORIAL

Destroying a river to clean it

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FOR DECADES a GE factory complex in Pittsfield leaked polychlorinated biphenyls - suspected carcinogens better known as PCBs - into the Housatonic River. Under a consent decree with the US Environmental Protection Agency, the company has already dredged a couple miles of the river downstream from the plant to remove the chemicals, and it has more cleanup work to do.

Now GE is proposing even more intensive dredging for the next 5 miles, a stretch that winds through an Audubon sanctuary and a state wildlife preserve. Even advocates of getting the PCBs out of the river are asking whether GE is destroying a village to save it.

The portion of the river that has already been excavated and lined with retaining riprap stones is a poor advertisement for doing anything similar on the next stretch. What had been a tree-lined stream wandering through backyards is now a "ditch," as one environmentalist puts it. Residents and local officials will want to know why GE has rejected less disruptive methods, such as cleansing the sediment on site with equipment that allows immediate reuse of the material. That would eliminate the need to remove and replace more than 300,000 tons of sediment from the Housatonic and its flood plain. It would also eliminate need for a landfill for the sediment, something Mayor James Ruberto of Pittsfield has said he will not allow in his city.

There are other options. Timothy Gray, spokesman of the activist group Housatonic River Initiative, wants GE to try using enzymes from earthworms to break down pollutants on at least a quarter-acre site. A GE spokesman said the company has looked at worms and other microbial solutions for destroying PCBs and found they would not work at the scale needed and in the environment of a polluted river.

Gray also questions why, if dredging is the best method, the company is not proposing it for the next 5-mile stretch of the river beyond the sanctuary and state preserve, leading to a dammed pond in Lenox Dale. GE is proposing just to lay six inches of clean fill on the river bottom to trap contaminated sediment on that portion of the river.

The Massachusetts Audubon Society has not taken a definitive position on the plan, but it is concerned about how dredging would affect its 264-acre Canoe Meadows sanctuary, a site for bird-watching, paddling, hiking, and cross-country skiing. The area is home to bobolinks, osprey, great blue herons, wild turkeys, beaver, and otter.

Even GE acknowledges that under its proposal there will still be restrictions on eating fish from the river. So the public and EPA have every reason to wonder whether its plan's costs and benefits are anywhere near in balance.