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A 'ditch' runs through it

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Some critics wonder whether the cleanup of the Housatonic River is doing more harm than good

By Beth Daley, Globe Staff | July 14, 2008

PITTSFIELD - Everyone agrees that the Housatonic River needs to be scrubbed clean: So many toxic chemicals were dumped into the 150-mile-long waterway that it has become one of the nation's filthiest.

But many in the region are recoiling from the restoration of the first 2 miles. Sloping river banks were lined with a wall of gray rocks to prevent erosion of polluted soil. Mature, leafy trees were cut down to make room for excavation equipment. Contaminated river sediment was dug out and hauled to landfills, prompting concerns the problem was simply moved somewhere else.

"They turned a free-flowing river into an industrial ditch," said George Wislocki, founder of the Berkshire Natural Resources Council.

Now as General Electric, the river's polluter, proposes to use many of the same methods to scrub and contain large portions of the next 10 miles, state officials and environmentalists are warning of the damage that may be done to a Massachusetts Audubon Sanctuary and state wildlife lands in the name of saving the river. Although the Housatonic is dirty, its banks and floodplain host key habitats for dozens of threatened plants and animals, ones that could be destroyed by excavation and the armoring of the river.

River advocates want less-tried, but potentially gentler methods used, and a flexible plan that could change as technologies improve to clean pollutants on-site, avoiding massive dredging or excavating. Such a plan, they say, might help pilot technologies that could be used elsewhere in the country for other cleanups.

"Let's not rush this," said Wislocki.

Yet officials with the US Environmental Protection Agency say the river needs to be cleaned as quickly as possible because of the extreme danger it poses to humans and wildlife. Agency officials say they are open to new cleansing technologies, but so far those available are unproven, especially on the scale needed for the Housatonic, or do not scrub enough of the contaminants out of the river sediment.

Last month, Ian Bowles, the state secretary of energy and environmental affairs, expressed reservations about the company's proposed cleanup methods. EPA says it also has numerous concerns about GE's proposal. The federal agency will submit comments to the company in coming months and then open the company's revised proposal to public comment before making a final decision next year.

The Housatonic's legacy of pollution stretches back decades. General Electric operated a 254-acre transformer manufacturing plant on its Pittsfield banks for almost 50 years through the 1970s. For much of that time, the site leaked polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) - a probable human carcinogen. Cleanup officials have found PCBs in river sediment and even buried in hundreds of drums around the city.

Today, signs are posted along the river warning people not to eat the fish. The river's reputation permeates the city - a small boy on a bicycle passing the cleanup recently yelled, "It's a nice polluted river, isn't it?" as he sped past.

When the original cleanup began, residents and environmentalists were happy to see that one of the most polluted parts of the river would be cleaned and restored. GE, which says it has spent \$400 million so far, literally halved the river by driving cast iron sheets into the sediment, draining one half before

excavating contaminated material. The material was taken to landfills and the riverbed and banks lined with rocks to prevent remaining PCBs from getting into the water. Then, the process was repeated on the other side.

Residents and environmentalists - many of whom expected a natural-looking river after the cleanup - think it looks terrible.

"Remediation can be messy; no one is walking away from that reality," said EPA Housatonic River project manager Susan Svirsky. She said the banks needed to be heavily armored near homes so land wouldn't erode - a tactic that may not be needed for the next section, where more natural methods could stabilize river banks.

Svirsky said EPA has searched for alternative technologies that could replace excavation of river sediment - and has found none that work well enough.

Although some scientists and businesses have touted using naturally occurring bacteria to eat PCBs in the river, for example, EPA found nothing that could break through the strong chlorine bonds in the Housatonic toxins.

Still, Svirsky said EPA is examining a more proven chemical extraction technology, along with a process called thermal desorption, which burns PCBs out of sediment and then captures them. Yet both are expensive, she said, and can render the sediment sterile, meaning that nothing will grow in it.

"EPA would love to have innovative (technology) . . . however there is no such technology out there now," Svirsky said.

Not everyone agrees. Benno Friedman of the Housatonic River Initiative says there are promising technologies that the EPA has not fully explored. Some of those his group and others have researched include injecting earthworm enzymes to break down the contaminants and capping the river bottom with substances that bind up toxins so they can't be eaten by fish and other animals.

"We're baffled that there seems to be an institutional bias against exploring the full-range of promising technologies," said Friedman.

GE officials say they did explore alternative technologies, but none exist that would get the river clean enough.

"If those [technologies] worked at the scale of this kind . . . GE would be the first in line to get them in use," said Peter O'Toole, director of public affairs. "We've invested a lot of money and man-hours getting the best experts looking how the river could be best remediated. But to get to the levels that are required at the cost that makes the project feasible," the company has not found anything, he said.

At Canoe Meadows, the serene Massachusetts Audubon Sanctuary in Pittsfield that the Housatonic flows through, a thriving ecosystem surrounds the filthy water. Scores of birds sang one recent warm afternoon.

As Kathy Sferra, director of stewardship for Massachusetts Audubon, walked down a grassy path, she said the cleanup could alter the 262-acre parcel so much that the floodplain habitat could be lost forever. GE, she said, has not satisfactorily explained how it will restore habitat after it is torn up during excavation.

"All of us have this lead knife in the stomach because this place is going to look so different," under GE's proposal, she said. "We're saying let's go slow, let's watch and see what we learn. The river deserves that."

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