

NEWS & ISSUES

Toxic pollution, destructive cleanup?

Groups say river needs protection from PCB cleanup

By DAVID SCRIBNER
Contributing writer

PITTSFIELD, Mass.

As the effort to clean PCBs out of the Housatonic River celebrates its 10th anniversary, some are wondering whether the cure may be as bad as the disease.

Where the river flows past the urban neighborhoods of Pittsfield, the pollution has been largely removed. Within the city, 1.5 miles of riverbed were dredged in the past decade to remove contaminated sediment.

But the dredging process also aimed to control the course of the river and deepen its channel to ward off flooding. The Housatonic's banks were scoured, reinforced with riprap and planted with shrubs and trees to prevent erosion. The result is a river that looks more engineered than natural.

So far, General Electric, under a 1997 consent decree with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, has spent nearly \$250 million to clean up the contamination it visited upon the city of Pittsfield.

But an even more daunting and potentially more costly undertaking awaits as the cleanup moves to its next phase – what is quaintly termed the “Rest of the River,” from the confluence of the east and west river branches at Fred Garner Park in Pittsfield southward to Long Island Sound.

Of urgent concern to environmentalists as the cleanup continues southward into the rural Berkshire County countryside is whether the Housatonic and its floodplain can be both cleansed of PCBs and also restored to something like its meandering, natural condition, with its recreational, ecological and scenic characteristics intact.

The implicit conflict between cleanup and restoration was the subject of a daylong “Future of the Housatonic” conference in late September, spon-



David Scribner file photo

Environmentalists say the government needs to protect the natural, meandering course of the Housatonic River as it works to remove PCB pollution from portions of the river like Woods Pond.

sored by the Housatonic River Initiative. More than 100 representatives from environmental groups, the EPA and GE gathered at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Pittsfield to hear presentations by five engineering and conservation firms specializing in river restoration projects.

Just two weeks before the conference, the EPA had declared GE's proposal for cleaning up the river south of Pittsfield to be “inadequate.” In particular, the agency criticized GE's strategy, which relies on dredging the river and capping polluted sediments with sand. The EPA said the company had failed to address the impacts its cleanup methods would have on the river's ecosystems and recreational resources.

The EPA also faulted GE for proposing PCB landfills in towns along the river, rather than taking advantage of adjacent rail transportation to remove contaminated sludge from the area, as the company has agreed to do in its cleanup of the upper Hudson River in New York.

For the Housatonic, the EPA advised GE to consider a plan that could “accommodate new knowledge and advances in technology” and might thereby allow for a cleanup that's “less disruptive to the river and ecosystem.”

GE has 90 days to revise its study to incorporate the EPA's recommendations.

Pollution far and wide

The problem with designing a cleanup plan that treads lightly on the river's ecosystems is that the contamination is so widespread — and deep.

“PCBs are perfectly happy to stay put,” explained Susan Svirsky, the EPA project manager for the Rest of the River cleanup. “They like sediment; they don't like water. They like organic carbon, like fat, so they travel up the food chain, and unexpectedly, according to our studies, theyglom onto the sand particles that are used in capping.”

“But here's the problem: There are PCBs embedded in sediments buried 12 feet down, all the way to the glacial bedrock, in some hot spots along the river. And in the extensive floodplain, they're buried down to a depth of 8 feet. That makes for a very complex situation.”

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are a class of chemicals GE used for decades at its transformer-manufacturing complex in Pittsfield, before the chemicals were banned in the late 1970s. PCBs are now considered a probable human carcinogen and have been linked in some studies to a variety of developmental and reproductive problems.

Whatever cleanup approach is eventually adopted is certain to be intrusive to some degree, displacing the diverse population of fish, ducks, birds, mink and amphibians and the rich variety of flora that depend upon the twisting waterway.

The dilemma is this: Concerns about the health effects of PCBs require that the highest concentrations in the riverbed and floodplain be either capped or removed to minimize exposure. But unless all the pollution is removed — a goal that would require massive excavation — the path of the river has to be controlled to make sure it doesn't recontaminate itself.

“We'd like a river that ends up looking like a

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News & Issues

river, rather than a concrete channel like the Housatic River in North Adams," declared Benno Friedman of Great Barrington, an organizer of the conference. "Can you provide us with the facts about what is possible and give us a vision for what the river can be when it's all over?"

The essence of the Housatonic can be preserved, the experts addressing the conference concluded, if the goal of eventual full restoration is given equal importance with the task of digging out the polluted soil.

Mixing ecology, engineering

"The key to restoration," advised Stephen J. Souza of Princeton Hydro of Princeton, N.J., "is to infuse an ecological approach into engineering proposals."

Often engineers' plans meet the regulatory requirements of contamination removal but won't work ecologically, he observed.

"You need an approach that expands the objectives of the cleanup, one that includes full restoration," Souza said.

Brian Graber of American Rivers, a national environmental group, urged the adoption of a long-term cleanup and restoration plan to establish a river environment that would be viable at

least 50 years hence.

"Rivers are extremely powerful entities," he said. "You cannot lock them in a channel. Rivers migrate over time, so you have to let rivers have the freedom to evolve and provide resilience to withstand what rivers can do."

Graber said his guiding principles are "when in doubt, simulate nature, and secondly, pursue self-sustaining kinds of interventions that don't rely upon human maintenance."

Andrew Selle of Wisconsin-based Interfluvio urged those directing the cleanup to avoid channelization and to maintain the river's connection to its floodplain environment.

"You are having to decide what the river will be like in 100 years, taking into account that rivers move and won't be in the same place in 50 years they are now," he said.

Wendi Goldsmith, president of the Bioengineering Group in Salem, Mass., agreed.

"The ecological outcome must be determined before engineering occurs," she said. "We need to make the Housatonic River, its watershed, its banks and its floodplain, a sustainable environment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

While the bioengineers and conservationists each showed series of photographs depicting the restoration of distressed, channelized waterways into something resembling a natural river, a key component of each of these successful restoration projects was community awareness and involvement, explained Keith Bowers of Baltimore-based Biohabitats.

"You have to develop a master plan, and an involved public constituency becomes the stewards of the process," Bowers said. "You have to be very clear about science behind the restoration approach, and try to present the notion of the whole watershed as a living infrastructure."

"Think back to how we've abused our rivers in the past, and realize how resilient Mother Nature can be. And it turns out that restoration of a river leads to opportunities for real economic benefits — a restoration economy."

But river restoration advocates were also warned to be realistic, and to be prepared to compromise.

"The goal of restoration is to leave a place in better condition than when you found it," Selle said. "Can we get the Housatonic back to its condition in 1850? Maybe. Can we get it back to what it was before General Electric? Probably."

CHATHAM, NY AND VICINITY

OCTOBER EVENTS

(SEE CALENDAR FOR ADDITIONAL EVENTS)

Oct. 3 • Chatham Improv: interactive games, sketches, comedy • 8:30-10 pm • Lipperas'/Chatham House Wine Cellar, 29 Hudson Ave., Chatham

Oct. 4 • People's Open Mic • Peint O Gwrw Pub • sign-up 7:30 pm; performances at 8 • Main St., Chatham

Oct. 8 • monthly drop-in blues jam for amateur and professional musicians • 8 pm • Spencertown Academy • free

Oct. 10 • monthly drop-in folk jam for amateur and professional musicians • 8 pm • Spencertown Academy • free

Oct. 11 • Walking Tour of Chatham Village • Main Street

History Walk led by the president of the historical society • 1 pm • sign up at Welcome Home/Chatham Kids, 34 Main St. Meet there. • free

Oct. 11 Music for violin and piano by Mozart, Janacek, Faure • 7:30 pm • Spencertown Academy

Oct. 12 • Autumn in Austerlitz • festival with volunteers in 1830s costumes, food, crafts, antiques, vendors, live music and exhibits • 11 am • Old Austerlitz Site, Rte. 22

Oct. 16 • Nature Institute lecture by Henri Bortoft: "Goethe and the Dynamics of Being" • 7:30 pm • music room, Hawthorne Valley School • \$12/8

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- from Great Barrington: 30 minutes
- from Hudson: 25 minutes
- from Manchester: 1 hour, 40 minutes
- from Pittsfield: 35 minutes
- from Saratoga Springs: 1 hour, 5 minutes
- from Williamstown: 1 hour

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