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Hudson River communities afraid dredging will bring other problems

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SARATOGA SPRINGS - From the edge of his 1,200-acre spread, Charles Hanehan can stand with his back to more than a century of family dairy farming and face an uncertain future flowing in the swiftly moving Hudson River rippling by the cornfields on his land.

"This corn is in a flood plain," said Hanehan, who manages 1,200 dairy cattle with his son, Kurt, and produces Cabot Hunters' sharp cheddar cheese, what he naturally calls "the best cheddar cheese" in the world. "When the heavy rains come the river washes over about 100 acres here."

"I don't want to think of what would happen if there were PCBs in the river," he said. "I don't want to think about having any on my land. If people think PCBs are on your land, they will assume it enters the food chain. There is no evidence of that, but we would not be able to sell any milk from here."

Hanehan, a part of the 51-member Community Advisory Group created by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, spends a lot of time worrying about the 100,000 pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, lying buried along a 40-mile stretch of the river from Hudson Falls to Troy. They are the remnants of some 1.3 million pounds of the oily compound legally dumped into the river by the General Electric Co. between 1940 and 1997. The contamination has flowed down river and turned the Hudson's lower 200 miles into the nation's largest Superfund site.

The EPA intends to have GE remove about 3.1 million tons of river bottom containing the suspected carcinogen from a 15-mile stretch of river above the Hanehan farm, and nearly 1 million more tons resting in 25 miles of riverbed downstream. When the six-year project gets started in 2006, it will be the largest environmental dredging effort in the nation's history, removing enough contaminated mud to fill Yankee Stadium twice.

The EPA and GE do not yet know, however, how to accomplish such a massive environmental feat without increasing contamination of the river or creating

environmental and other problems.

Hanehan's immediate concern is the possibility that one of three huge facilities that will be needed to remove most of the water from the contaminated mud will be located just four miles upriver from his farm, in the town of Greenwich. The EPA is considering seven sites for the processing operations, where PCB-laden muck also will be loaded onto rail cars for shipment to out-of-state landfills.

All the sites are opposed by their prospective host communities. Their concerns range from potential spills in the river and farmland contamination to rail car accidents in the rural countryside and the noise and smell from facilities that would operate at least 20 hours a day.

"We have a countywide position in support of the towns on the river," said Saratoga County Administrator David Wickerham. "We all opposed dredging and feel the dangers from the cleanup are greater than the problems it would solve. They may use barges to move this material on the river, which is good unless there is an accident like the one on the Staten Island ferry.

"We have towns that get their drinking water from the river," he said. "If a barge turns over, there will be lots of problems for them."

All seven of the possible dredge processing sites are vacant rural or industrial tracts of land and one, in Moreau, was once a dump for river dredging projects. Most of the sites have direct river access, though a proposed site at Fort Edward is more than a mile inland, located along the Champlain Canal.

"All of them have people nearby, though not necessarily right up against the fences," said Leo Rosales, of the EPA's Hudson River Field Office. "That is something we have to look at in the selection process."

There are also schools next to the proposed sites in Greenwich and Halfmoon.

Fort Edward Councilwoman Sharon Ruggi said a processing plant there would "devalue property in the town" and make it difficult for Hudson River communities to use their riverside to attract major business developments.

"I don't think there is a responsible industry, looking for a location, that would put it next to a dewatering facility," Ruggi said. "Corporations have to be so concerned about workers' health and well being."

"My people are scared," said Ken DeCerce, the town supervisor of Halfmoon, a riverside community that passed a resolution against the dredging and proposed location of a processing site on 22 acres in his town. "This material is alleged to cause cancer, and the dredge site is near the town water intake on the river. We have to drink it."

The EPA still has several decisions to make as the facilities' design phase proceeds. For one, it still does not know exactly how many land-based operations will be needed to process the contaminated mud or where they should be located. The sites will need at least 15 acres to process the sludge and another 15 to handle the 50 to 100 rail cars expected to be needed each day to remove the processed, contaminated sediment.

Doug Garbarini, the EPA's design team leader, said the sites are expected to operate at least 20 hours daily and "may continue longer than that. We are going to be pulling a lot of material out of the river and there is a need to process as much as possible."

The EPA also must decide what type of dredging method to use at each of the 40 dredge sites along the river - hydraulic dredging, in which mud and water are vacuumed through a long flexible tube, or clamshell dredging, in which a bucket with a self sealing lid is lowered from a barge and scoops up sediment. The decision depends on factors such as water speed and depth, and the distance of processing facilities from the river. The EPA is expected to release preliminary plans next month for the dredging systems to be used in each area.

Fort Edward Supervisor Marilyn Pulver predicted that trains of barges hauling contaminated sediment would seriously impede commercial and recreational use of the winding river.

"There are sections of the river which are shallow and you have to use the (Champlain) canal to get through," Pulver said. "You could only get one barge through at a time. And if they use a barge, it would tie up river traffic and eliminate transportation by boat from Lake Champlain into the Hudson River as far south as Troy."

In addition to navigation concerns, those who live in communities being eyed for the dewatering facilities also are worried about noise, odor and air pollution. "The pumps can be relatively noisy," Garbarini said. "It's a balancing act to see what is going to work best for us and meet community concerns."

Lastly, the EPA has yet to set three key standards for the overall dredging project - how much material will be dredged each year, how much PCBs can be left in the sediment after dredging; and how much resuspended, or spilled, PCBs will be allowed to float in the water.

The EPA wants these standards to have equal weight, and failure to meet any of these standards would bring the project to a halt. But GE spokesman Mark Behan said the speed at which the PCBs are removed from the river should not be a major factor.

"It is still a question as to how fast we can safely and effectively dig up, transport, and process the amount of sediment required by a production standard without causing unacceptable resuspension and residual levels," Behan said.

Many environmental groups from further down river, and some upstate organizations, insist that fears of possible disaster are misplaced.

"The hysteria about the noise and smell makes no sense when you consider the area where they plan the dredging and dewatering facilities already has a lot of noise," said Aaron Mair, president of the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corp. in Albany. "The GE operations up in Fort Edward look like an oil refinery field with more lights than the runway at JFK Airport. In Glenn Falls there is the constant roar from the paper mills. For folks to say now they are worried about noise pollution is a joke."

Joe Gardner of the Mohawk-Hudson chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club said the river already has been adversely affected by the presence of PCBs for decades.

"It's hard to understand a mentality that fights something that will improve the situation," Gardner said. "The dewatering sites will be state of the art and will be away from schools and populations as much as possible. The issues that these Washington County and Saratoga County people are raising are a charade."

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