

## **GE Squeezed Into \$250M PCB Cleanup**

**WASHINGTON, DC**, October 8, 1999 (ENS) - General Electric Company has agreed to spend an estimated \$250 million to clean up the Housatonic River, polluted by decades of hazardous chemical discharges from its plant in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. The settlement, announced Thursday, finalizes cleanup and reclamation plans that the company has been negotiating with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Justice and state officials for more than a year.

From the 1930s until 1977, General Electric (GE) manufactured transformers and other equipment containing polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in Pittsfield. By the time the federal government banned PCBs in 1977, the 250 acre site and the nearby Housatonic were heavily contaminated with PCBs and other hazardous materials.

### **A stretch of the Housatonic River (Photo by AM Dromaris. All photos courtesy Housatonic River Initiative)**

Today, PCBs are found in the Housatonic River from western Massachusetts to its mouth in New York's Long Island Sound.

"This consent decree means GE will clean up the Housatonic River," said Lois Schiffer, assistant attorney general for environment and natural resources, announcing the completed agreement. "Today's settlement is a major step by GE toward ending the legacy of pollution in the river."

GE agreed to pay for the cleanup in September 1998, but the signing of a formal consent decree was delayed by complex negotiations between the company and federal and state officials. "You get the lawyers involved and time does slow down." noted GE spokesman Bruce Bunch.

### **The Housatonic River watershed covers parts of three states (Map courtesy EPA)**

Under the legally binding consent decree, GE has agreed to shoulder the full costs for removing contaminated sediment from the half-mile stretch of the Housatonic nearest the GE plant by May, 2001. GE will also clean up contamination at the Pittsfield plant and other sites in Berkshire County, including a school and several commercial properties.

Through a cost sharing agreement, GE will also pay much of the price for the EPA to clean up an additional one and a half mile stretch of the river. The EPA estimates that cleaning up the plant and these river stretches will cost the company more than \$200 million. GE estimates that cleanup costs will only be about \$150 million.

"The consent decree agreement ... is a detailed blueprint for fixing the past so that Pittsfield and Berkshire County can focus on the future," said Stephen Ramsey, GE vice president for corporate environmental programs, in a statement released yesterday. "Like all settlements, this one required compromises from all sides. But it shows that creative and constructive solutions can emerge when government and business sit down to negotiate in good faith."

### **This house in the Lakewood section of Pittsfield was condemned due to heavy PCB contamination**

GE will also carry out a redevelopment plan for parts of the Pittsfield facility, designed to bring new commercial life to the surrounding town. Part of the site will be transferred to the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, after the buildings are demolished and the underlying soil is cleaned. The EPA estimates the costs of this project at \$50 million.

"The investment in community restoration and community development represented by this agreement should benefit the citizens of Pittsfield and Berkshire County," said Ramsey.

Later, after the EPA selects a cleanup plan for downstream portions of the river, GE will perform that cleanup as well. The cost of cleaning these additional river miles will be in addition to the hefty price tags attached to restoring the areas close to the plant.

Government sources told ENS the final cleanup costs, including downriver stretches, could easily reach \$350 million, and may run as high as \$750 million.

GE has already agreed to a natural resource package to help restore downstream areas damaged by pollution from the Pittsfield site. The company will make \$15 million available to natural resource trustees - including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Connecticut and Massachusetts state agencies - to restore or acquire habitat and promote wildlife recovery.

### **Residents of Lakewood and other Housatonic communities have pushed for a comprehensive cleanup plan**

Up to \$4 million in potential future revenues from the redevelopment of the Pittsfield site could also be made available for natural resource projects, through a special agreement with the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority.

"This agreement is the most significant step yet for our common goal of the environmental and economic restoration of Pittsfield," said John DeVillars, administrator of EPA's New England office. Cleanup of the first half mile of the Housatonic near the plant will begin immediately. The rest of the cleanup will proceed on an expedited schedule outlined by the EPA.

The consent decree, filed in U.S. District Court in Springfield, Massachusetts, is subject to a 60 day comment period. A U.S. District Judge must approve the settlement before it becomes final.  
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