

Partial opinion paper of a non-scientist and non-corporate employee

U.S. Environmental Chief Attacks G.E. Pollution Ads

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The Clinton Administration's top environmental official said today that an ongoing publicity campaign by the General Electric Company playing down the health hazard from its factories' pollution of the Hudson River "could put people's health at risk."

Carol M. Browner, the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, accused the company of trying to confuse the public as part of a broad effort to delay or limit the cleanup of tons of PCB's, or polychlorinated biphenyls, that coat the river bottom for 200 miles and make the Hudson the most extensive Federal Superfund site in the United States.

Testifying before the first of several hearings on the river before the Environmental Conservation Committee of the New York State Assembly, Ms. Browner said the company's efforts were undermining state health advisories warning young women and children to eat no fish from the river.

"G.E. would have the people of the Hudson River believe, and I quote, 'Living in a PCB-laden area is not dangerous,' " Ms. Browner testified. "Well, you know something? The science tells us the opposite is true." Federal scientists say PCB's probably cause cancer in people.

The statement she quoted was made in May by John F. Welch Jr., the chairman of General Electric, during the company's annual shareholders' meeting.

Steven D. Ramsey, vice president for environmental programs at General Electric, said in a telephone interview that the company had compiled a long list of independent studies showing no link between PCB's and human cancer, and that other studies questioned any connection to other health effects, like disruption of hormones. He said that Ms. Browner's appearance, in a forum without any scientists on hand and no chance for hostile questions, "is politics, politics, politics."

General Electric's public relations campaign along the river has intensified in the last two years, asserting that the risk of leaving the chemicals in the silt is very low, while the risks and cost of dredging the tainted bottom would be very high.

Richard L. Brodsky, the committee chairman and a Westchester County Democrat, said company officials would testify before the panel late in the summer.

Mr. Brodsky said the company was continuing to use science to confuse, not clarify, the situation. "As with any scientific question there are always going to be ways to raise doubts," he said. "That's the same strategy the tobacco companies used for 10 years."

Since the early 1980's, General Electric and the Federal Government have been tussling over how to deal with one million pounds of PCB's that two of the company's factories, now closed, in Fort Edward and Glens Falls, released into the Hudson over a 30-year period. .

Before PCB's were banned in 1977, they were widely used in industry and could be legally dumped into water. The compounds persist in some 40 spots on the river bottom and in many types of fish, including striped bass and catfish.

Ms. Browner said her agency would decide how to deal with the PCB's in the Hudson by December 2000. For General Electric, hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake -- both the potential cost of widespread dredging of "hot spots" of PCB-tainted silt and the cost of claims by the Federal and state governments for damage to natural resources.

And the decision on the Superfund site on the Hudson could affect cleanups at many of the 74 other Superfund sites where General Electric is responsible for some pollution.

At the hearing, Ms. Browner said that it was the first time she had testified before any state legislative committee in her tenure as Administrator, but that the cleanup of the Hudson was important enough for her to come to New York to "set the record straight."

Ms. Browner said that more than 20 carefully reviewed studies reinforced the position of her agency and Federal health officials: that PCB's are known to cause cancer in animals and are a probable cause of cancer in people, and that they appear to have other adverse health effects.

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