

I P E N

PCB Working Group

Communities Respond to PCB Contamination: Their Stories are Here

The PCB Working Group of IPEN has identified and gathered information on communities that are responding to PCB contamination. We hope that this information, which includes numerous informative links and contact information for local activists, will enable communities around the world dealing with PCBs to more effectively respond to this threat.

For each community, we provide information about the following:

- History of PCB Contamination
- About the Community
- What the Community Has Done To Get PCB Solutions
- The Current Situation
- Local Contact Information

We plan to add other communities to this section of the Web site as we gather more information. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

At this time, we have information about PCB contamination and the community response for:

- [Mohawk Nation community of Akwesasne](#)
- [Bloomington Indiana USA](#)
- [Arctic PCB Contamination](#)
- [Former Clark and Subic U.S. military bases, Republic of the Philippines](#)
- [The Fox River and Green Bay, Wisconsin, USA](#)
- [The Hudson River, New York, U.S.A.](#)
- [Pittsfield Massachusetts USA](#)
- [Perote and Porvenir, Mexico](#)

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Communities Respond to PCB Contamination

Mohawk Nation community of Akwesasne

History of PCB Contamination

In 1959, General Motors Corporation (GM), using cheap local hydroelectric power, opened an [aluminum casting facility](#) directly on the western border of the Mohawk Nation community of Akwesasne. GM used PCBs and other toxic waste on the plant's grounds. According to the [Akwesasne Task Force on the Environment](#), a community based, grass-roots organization, these toxic materials contaminated the three waterways surrounding the plant - the St. Lawrence River, Raquette River and Turtle Creek - where the Mohawk people have hunted and fished since ancient times. Because of PCB contamination, fish from these rivers are no longer safe to eat and this has had a profound impact on the culture and lifestyle of Mohawk people. In 1983, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) placed the GM site on the National Priority List of Superfund sites that need urgent cleanup action.

The Aluminum Company of America or ALCOA also operates an [aluminum smelter](#) in Massena, NY, on the Grasse River approximately 6 miles upstream from Akwesasne. ALCOA is being required to investigate and clean up its on-site contamination, which includes PCBs, cyanide, PAHs, fluoride and arsenic, by the International Joint Commission on the Great Lakes and by government agencies in the U.S.A. and Canada.

About the Community

The [Haudenosaunee](#) are an ancient people of the northeastern woodlands of North America. The Mohawk Nation is one of the nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Akwesasne is a Mohawk community of 12,000 encompassing a [series of islands](#) in the St. Lawrence River, whose territory overlaps the boundaries of Quebec and Ontario in Canada and New York State in the U.S.A.

What the Community Has Done To Get PCB Solutions

The Akwesasne Task Force on the Environment (ATFE) was formed in 1987 to address the environmental problems facing the Mohawk Nation community of Akwesasne. It is composed of members of the Mohawk community and staff of environmental agencies, Mohawk governments, and organizations within Akwesasne who share a common concern for the environment and the effects of various toxic substances on human and ecosystem health. ATFE has pressed the U.S. EPA for faster and more effective action on the General Motors and other nearby toxic sites. ATFE has also partnered with the State University of New York to carry out groundbreaking [research](#) based on the collaboration of community and university.

The St. Regis Mohawk Tribe has established an [Environment Division](#), which seeks to prevent disease

and injury, while promoting lifestyles that respect, protect and enhance the environment for the next seven generations at Akwesasne.

The Current Situation

In March, 1999, the U.S. EPA, in consultation with the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe and the State of New York, [changed the clean-up plan](#) for the General Motors Superfund Site so that General Motors will remove from the site an estimated 18,000 cubic yards of material contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) above 10 parts per million (ppm). This decision substantially changed earlier EPA decisions. ATFE noted that General Motors would have saved \$15 million by disposing of all PCB-contaminated material on site.

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Communities Respond to PCB Contamination

Bloomington Indiana USA

History of PCB Contamination

Beginning in 1957, Westinghouse Electric Corporation (whose successor is the CBS Corporation), while manufacturing PCB-filled capacitors and processing defective ones, routinely poured PCBs into the Bloomington sewer system and dumped defective, PCB-filled capacitors into area garbage dumps and limestone quarries. As a result, in the Bloomington area, five garbage dumps, a sewage treatment plant, a salvage yard and the former Westinghouse factory and grounds are PCB-related Superfund sites. In addition, PCBs were burned in the open air at dumps, and the City gave away, to home gardeners, supposedly organic sludge from the sewage treatment plant. Westinghouse/CBS no longer operates in Bloomington.

About the Community

Bloomington, Indiana, a college town, has about 74,000 residents, about half of whom are students. The Indiana University, established in 1820 and one of the Big Ten colleges in the U.S. Midwest, is the area's largest employer in a diversified economy set in an area of wooded ridges and rolling hills in south central Indiana. The local karst terrain is characterized by sinkholes, caves and underground springs.

What the Community Has Done To Get PCB Solutions

Over more than two decades, toxics activism in the area has fluctuated, and is currently at a low ebb.

The first "cleanup" proposal was made in 1983. Westinghouse and the city, county, state and federal governments secretly negotiated a consent decree for a trash/PCB/sludge incinerator, with the operating expenses to be paid by local residents in the form of "tipping fees" -- charges to those disposing of waste. In 1985, Bloomington's city council voted for the incinerator, despite 8,000 signatures on an anti-incinerator petition and other citizen protest. Activists described the incinerator plan as serving "no purpose other than to allow Westinghouse to recoup its cleanup costs via tipping fees which the City and County had privately agreed to pay Westinghouse," and as doing nothing to remedy health effects from local PCBs, or PCB impacts on local groundwater and agriculture. St. Lawrence University faculty member and internationally known anti-incinerator activist Paul Connett stated, "The whole notion of using trash as a fuel to burn PCB contaminated soil is utterly, utterly absurd. It is, quite frankly, the Monty Python of waste management"

Local activists had called for storage of the contaminated material in steel-reinforced concrete bunkers, with new cleanup technologies to be tested on samples until one or more were found suitable for Bloomington's varied contaminated sites.

Eventually, due to persistent activism, "established authorities lost control of the agenda in Bloomington.... and [m]ass opinion, most "mainstream" groups, and the local media have all turned against the settlement," according to a paper, [Backyard Protest: Emergence, Expansion, and Persistence of a Local Hazardous Waste Controversy](#), by political scientist James Simmons and Nancy Stark. (This paper is a study of the political process surrounding the Bloomington PCB issue.)

A 1990 Westinghouse proposal to dump incinerator ash in a rural location bought the [Coalition Against PCB Ash in Monroe County](#) (COPA) into existence.. COPA has litigated against the proposal and obtained an EPA Technical Assistance Grant.

The Current Situation

In 1994, the five consent decree parties announced a new agreement: to evaluate alternatives to the proposed incinerator. EPA has moved forward with what activists say are sham cleanups of some sites, with contaminated material moved to hazardous waste dumps in Utah, Michigan and Kansas against the protests of activists. They claim that the process is unsafe for people and the environment, possibly an instance of environmental racism and counter to the concept of an authentic cleanup. Water treatment at several sites is also a serious issue. Disputes continue over what cleanup is needed and what activities CBS/Westinghouse will pay for.

On August 11, 1999, Westinghouse/CBS announced, in the lead story in the [Bloomington Herald-Times](#) that the PCB cleanup in the Bloomington area would be complete by the end of 2000. The plan includes a permanent cap on a Superfund site with no provision for containing the contamination at the bottom of the pile, on the grounds that the contamination is "too deep." Another seriously contaminated site is expected to get the same treatment; both sites were originally to be totally excavated under the 1985 consent decree.

Some local activists argue that the planned cleanup levels are inadequate and unorthodox and are based on the notion of cleaning up only "hot spots," and that the method of sampling the sites is scientifically unsound. According to the newspaper story, "Some critics of the cleanup have raised concerns that the accelerated schedule has led to shortcuts that will endanger the public's health." The article also notes, "EPA will hand over operation of the [water treatment plant at one site] to the Indiana Department of Environmental Management after a year, and both agencies will sue CBS to recover the costs of building and operating the [\$6 million] plant."

In the spring of 2000, Bloomington activists reported that contaminated material from Lemon Lane Landfill was about to be shipped, apparently to Wayne Disposal in Belleville, Michigan. Local activists believe the material is contaminated with dioxin as well as PCBs, due to burning that took place on the site.

Local Contact Information

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[Coalition Against PCB Ash in Monroe County](#)

Note: A major source for this page is [The PCB Mess in Bloomington, Indiana Slouching Toward a](#)

[Sane, Just Cleanup](#), by Linda Greene, published in [Synthesis/Regeneration: A Magazine of Green Social Thought](#), summer 1995.

"Westinghouse Corporation's long and dedicated effort to make South-Central Indiana its very own toilet convinces me that the only fair way to deal with the firm's nasty waste matter is by hauling it to all the boardrooms, offices, homes and yards of Westinghouse corporate executives and their lawyers. I'd be happy to subsidize a truck or two."

James Alexander Thom, letter to the editor,
[Bloomington Herald-Times](#), Dec. 15, 1990

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Communities Respond to PCB Contamination

Arctic PCB Contamination

History of PCB Contamination

Significant levels of PCBs have been found in indigenous people living in the Arctic, as well as in Arctic mammals.

Annual [weather patterns](#) transport PCBs and other toxic substances into the Arctic. As noted by Aqqaluk Lyngé, President of the [Inuit Circumpolar Conference](#) in [1997 remarks to the United Nations](#), persistent organic pollutants, including PCBs, "are transported from tropical and temperate lands to the Arctic "sink," where they bioaccumulate and bioconcentrate, particularly in the marine food chain."

In addition, PCBs were released in certain areas of the Arctic, especially at the 63 military sites in Canada, Greenland and Alaska that were part of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) system of radar sites. At these sites, according to the [Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme's](#) (see below) report, [Arctic Pollution Issues: A State of the Arctic Environment Report](#), an estimated 30 tonnes of PCBs were used, and "an unknown amount has ended up in their landfills."

However the contaminants come to the Arctic, "the Arctic does ...act as a cold trap, collecting and maintaining a wide range of industrial pollutants, from PCBs to toxaphene, chlordane to mercury," according to the [Canadian Polar Commission](#). As a result, Lyngé noted in the speech cited above, "many Inuit have levels of PCBs, DDTs and other persistent organic pollutants [POPs] in their blood and fatty tissues that are five to ten times greater than the national average in Canada or the United States." The [Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme](#), a joint activity of the Arctic nations and organizations of indigenous Arctic people, found in its study [Pollution and Human Health](#) (available on its Web site) that PCB blood levels, while highest in Greenland and the eastern Canadian Arctic, were high enough (over 4 micrograms of PCBs per liter of blood) that a proportion of the population would be in a risk range for fetal and childhood development problems.

(Other sources of information on Arctic contamination by PCBs and other toxics include the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme's Arctic Pollution Issues: A State of the Arctic Environment Report (available on the [AMAP](#) site) and the Environmental Defense Fund's draft [Circumpolar Atlas of Environmental Concerns](#).)

About the Communities

About 130,000 indigenous Arctic people live in Greenland, in Canada, including the new territory of Nunavut, in Alaska, and in Chukotka, in Russia. For those who maintain a

traditional land-based lifestyle, "the process of hunting and fishing, followed by the sharing of food-- the communal partaking of animals -- is a time-honoured ritual that binds us together and links us with our ancestors," as Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Vice President of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, explained in a [speech](#) to the International Negotiating Committee Regarding the Need for a Global Treaty on Persistent Organic Pollutants in Montreal, Quebec, Canada in June, 1998.

What Arctic Organizations Have Done To Get PCB Solutions

The Inuit Circumpolar Conference has taken an active role in the international negotiations around POPs, and in other international forums, and in linking to other communities threatened by PCBs and other POPs. In her Montreal speech cited above, Ms. Watt-Cloutier stated that "ICC will use its observer status in the UN to press for a comprehensive, rigorous, and verifiable global treaty on POPs."

In the late 1980s, transportation of PCBs by the Canadian Department of National Defense through the territory of the Labrador Inuit became a [serious issue](#) for that indigenous community.

In Alaska, the [Alaska Community Action on Toxics](#) works with indigenous communities around Alaska who are facing the toxic residue of Cold War sites, including the [Yu'pik community on Saint Lawrence Island](#). Alaska Community Action on Toxics provides the first comprehensive map of hazardous waste sites in Alaska, integrating data from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Department of Defense to identify over 2,000 contaminated sites around Alaska.

The Current Situation

In 1996, the U.S.A. and Canada agreed that Canada would no longer hold the U.S.A. responsible for DEW cleanup, in return for \$100 million in military hardware. [PCBs from the Canadian DEW sites](#) were then to be gathered and transported for incineration, probably at Swan Hills in Alberta, but the Canadian government found this method too expensive, and plans to leave the PCBs on site despite [protests from the Nunavut authorities](#).

PCBs and other POPs have been an issue of growing significance in Canada, especially for Northern indigenous people, and the issue is documented in depth in the Winter 1998 issue of [Arctic Perspectives](#), the magazine of the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee.

The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme has focused attention on Arctic toxic contamination. A major current activity by AMAP is the Multilateral Cooperative Project on Phase-out of PCB Use, and Management of PCB-contaminated Wastes, in the Russian Federation. PCB sources in Russia with an impact on the Arctic are less well known than those in North America, and may be under less effective control.

The U.S.A. has been criticized for its lack of participation in AMAP, according to David J. Tenenbaum, writing in the U.S. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences' Environmental Health Perspectives, where he describes [steps](#) being taken in 1999 to increase government attention to these issues in Alaska and the Arctic in general.

Ultimately, however, many observers would agree with Tenenbaum that, whatever other steps are taken, "the only real solution [to PCB and other contamination in the Arctic] is a global emphasis on prevention."

Contact Information for Organizations Working with Affected Communities

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Communities Respond to PCB Contamination

Former Clark and Subic U.S. military bases, Republic of the Philippines

History of PCB Contamination

Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay Naval Base were the largest U.S. overseas military installations, and major sites of the U.S. armed forces presence in the Philippines. That presence began in 1898. In 1991, the Philippine government voted not to renew the leases on U.S. bases in their nation, and these bases were evacuated by the U.S. military..

The wide range of military operations at the two bases "led to substantial contamination of the air, soil, groundwater, sediments, and coastal waters of the bases and the surrounding areas. Contaminants included petroleum hydrocarbons, aromatic hydrocarbons, chlorinated hydrocarbons, pesticides, PCBs, metals, asbestos, acids, explosives, and munitions." (Ted H. Schettler, M.D., M.P.H., [Reverberations of Militarism: Toxic Contamination, the Environment, and Health](#), Medicine and Global Survival, 1995.)

During the bases' operations, there was little attention to environmental concerns. When the bases were closed, no significant cleanup occurred. Electrical transformers and other equipment containing PCBs were left on site, as well as barrels and PCB-contaminated soil.

At military bases or former military bases within the U.S., "each base is now by law supposed to have a pollution prevention plans on site ... [and] citizens have the right to obtain and have a say in those plans...", according to the [Military Toxic Project](#)'s Fall/Winter 1998 newsletter, [Touching Bases](#). However, the residents around bases outside the U.S. do not have these same rights.

About the Communities

The former Clark Base area is in central Luzon, not far from Manila. It is close to the Pinatubo volcano, which erupted just as Clark Base was closing down. Many refugees from the eruption were housed on the site, some of them in a contaminated former motor pool area called Cabcom. Central Luzon, the "rice bowl" of the Philippines, is densely populated, and ambitious plans for economic development by the Clark Development Corporation, as well as opportunities for scavenging materials left behind by the U.S. military, have brought many people to the Clark site.

Subic Bay is on the coast of Luzon, also close to Manila. The Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority, the economic development entity in Subic Bay, recently publicized the contention that Subic Bay is free from pollution, due in part to its zoning practices. Yet in [The Toxic Legacy of U.S. Bases in the Philippines](#), published by the Friends of the Filipino People Bulletin, Jorge Emmanuel, Ph.D, noted that Rep. Richard Ray of the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee came to the

conclusion after a briefing by Navy officials at Subic in 1991 that "environmental policies were largely ignored at U.S. bases in the Pacific." Emmanuel also cited U.S. Principal Assistant Secretary of Defense David Berteau's response to the Los Angeles Times, when questioned about toxic contamination by the U.S. military, "If there's a horror story out there, Subic may be it." Numerous economic development projects are underway at Subic.

What the Community Has Done To Get PCB Solutions

The [People's Task Force for Bases CleanUp](#), initiated in 1994, is a network of 50 organizations and individuals in the Metro Manila, Clark and Subic areas. Its mission is to press the United States government to assume full responsibility to clean up the contamination of its former military bases in the Philippines through policy advocacy, information and education, research, monitoring and networking to ensure a meaningful participation of all concerned.

The People's Task Force for Bases CleanUp has carried out extensive outreach and research in the affected former base areas. It has also dramatized the situation of PCBs at Clark and Subic by actions such as a 1997 Christmas Eve caroling visit to the U.S. Embassy, bringing a dead tree with toxic ornaments and changing the words of traditional carols to songs about toxic waste. Most of the carolers came from the Cabcom evacuation center inside of the former Clark base, where, according to the People's Task Force for Bases CleanUp:

The Institute of Science of the University of the Philippines has confirmed that water in the center contains petroleum traces and chromium. A high incidence of premature births, [deformed] babies, miscarriages, stomach pain, skin allergies, and heart problems were also noted among the evacuees.

On Friday, March 3, in support of the long time demands of the People's Task Force for Bases Cleanup and others for US responsibility for its military toxic waste here, Greenpeace dumped a secure container holding toxic waste at the gate of the US Embassy to the Philippines. The waste was originally from the former US Clark Airbase and had been collected in residential communities surrounding the base. The activists demanded that the US take control and assume responsibility for this and other toxic materials left behind at its former military bases.

The waste consisted of a three-meter by two-meter box filled with 40 liters of liquid polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), contaminated soil and 12 parts of a PCB-leaking power transmitter earlier dismantled in Mabalacat town, labeled "Danger, Toxic--Property of the United States." The US Embassy refused to accept the container and instead called the police. Twenty six Greenpeace volunteers, from the Philippines, the United States, India, Thailand, China, Indonesia, Trinidad, Tunisia and the Netherlands, were arrested and later released. The story led the TV evening news and was on the front page of five local daily papers .

The Philippine Daily Inquirer (www.inquirer.net) reported:

"Local communities surrounding the former Clark Air Base have for many years identified mysterious deaths and health complaints, including cancer, nervous system disorders and reproductive problems. They now believe that the health disorders were caused by exposure to toxic materials left by the American forces. Last week, 6-year-old Crizel Valencia, whose family lives near the former Clark Air Base, died of leukemia, a blood disorder believed to have been caused by exposure to pollutants at the

base. Valencia died while touring the Rainbow Warrior. Her burial was accompanied by protests."

Jack Weinberg of the Environmental Health Fund, a participant in the Greenpeace action, also wrote about Crizel Valencia: "Though Crizel was very sick, she very much wanted to come, and her doctor advised she should be encouraged to do what will make her happy. Crizel did come, and she got to take a ride around Manila Bay in a Greenpeace inflatable boat. She was very happy and excited. Then, while she was still on board the Rainbow Warrior, Crizel died.... Some felt that Crizel had kept herself going for this one final experience in her life..... Now, as we move forward to press our demand that the US take responsibility to cleanup toxics contamination at its former military bases here, Crizel will be on all of our minds."

The People's Task Force for Bases Cleanup has published a booklet: *Inheritors of the Earth: The Human Face of the U.S. Military Contamination at Clark Air Base, Pampanga, Philippines*. The booklet contains profiles and photographs of many of these children, including Crizel.

More info and background is at the following web site

<http://www.greenpeace.org/~toxics/toxfreeasia/documents/clarksubic.html>

The Current Situation

The President of the United States, Bill Clinton, has denied that the U.S. has any further accountability for toxic wastes at Subic and Clark. However, the People's Task Force for Bases Clean Up, GreenPeace, and other organizations are pressing the U.S. government to change its position. The government of the Republic of the Philippines has said that it does not have the resources to clean up the toxic contamination at Clark and Subic.

In the spring of 2000, a joint meeting took place between the governments of the United States and the Philippines regarding the cleanup of the former American military bases there. The Filipino American Coalition for Environmental Solution (FACES) and the People's Task Force for Bases Cleanup hailed the American government's agreement to participate in the bilateral. However, the groups warned that the talks do not mean the U.S. government recognizes its responsibilities, but rather that it sees the base contamination issue as a barrier to U.S.-Filipino military cooperation.

Meanwhile, eighty-four residents and neighbors of the former Clark Air Field and Subic Naval Base petitioned the United States to have the property investigated for toxic contamination, in compliance with U.S. law.

Also, FACES is beginning a campaign in the U.S. for Philippine bases clean-up, using postcards with images from the life of Crizel Jane Valencia, (see above) who lived at the Clark site and died of leukemia at the age of six.

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Information is also available from [Greenpeace on US Toxic Legacies: Toxic Hotspots in Clark and Subic.](#)

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Communities Respond to PCB Contamination

The Fox River and Green Bay, Wisconsin, USA

History of PCB Contamination

The lower Fox River, in northeastern Wisconsin, USA, has the highest concentration of pulp and paper mills in the world. From 1957 on, at least 250,000 pounds of PCBs were dumped by some of those mills into the Fox River, mainly as a result of the recycling of PCB-containing carbonless copy paper, which ended in 1971. According to the [Clean Water of Northeast Wisconsin](#), Fox River sediments are now the largest waterborne source of PCBs to all of Lake Michigan. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notes on its [Website devoted to the Lower Fox River](#) that "some 160,000 pounds of PCBs have already left the Fox River and entered Green Bay and Lake Michigan, and that, on average, 600 additional pounds are flushed from the Lower Fox sediments each year," and that Fox River PCB dumping contaminated 11 million tons of sediment. The most contaminated sediment is located in about 35 "hot spots" along the River.

Clean Water of Northeast Wisconsin notes that as much as two thirds of the total PCBs in the entire system are sitting buried in the sediments between the De Pere Dam and the mouth of the Fox River, waiting to be flushed by storms into the bay, and in a normal year "approximately 4,000 lbs. of PCBs volatilize from the river and bay's surface directly into the air." Green Bay, a city of about 100,000 population located where the Fox River empties into Lake Michigan, has been substantially contaminated, and Clean Water of Northeast Wisconsin reports fish and ducks from the area are too contaminated to eat and that PCBs make recreational use of the Bay, obtaining drinking water, and dredging for navigation all problematic and dangerous.

The EPA also notes on its Fox River Website that "PCB levels in Lower Fox River and Green Bay fish are declining very slowly or not at all," and that "PCB water levels at the mouth of the Lower Fox River have not declined from 1989 to 1995 and are from 100 to 10,000 times greater than safe levels set by the State to protect human and ecological health."

About the Community

The Fox River area was historically the home area of the [Ho-Chunk Nation](#). In the early 19th century, with their land base threatened by the expansion of the Erie Canal, the Oneida Nation, part of the [Haudenosaunee Confederacy](#), purchased land in the area with the agreement of the existing local tribes, and moved to the area. During the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, there was considerable forced migration of indigenous peoples through the area. All of the Ho-Chunk Nation's land and most of the Oneida Nation's land were taken for European settlement. In recent years, both Nations have regained tribal land in the area through purchase.

The 19th century economy of the area was based on cutting local timber, which led to today's

concentration of paper industry sites. The [Fox River Group](#), a coalition of the seven paper companies that EPA considers the potentially responsible parties for Fox River PCB contamination, emphasizes that these companies employ more than 10,000 people in the area, and presents itself as representing the overall interests of the Fox River area.

What the Community Has Done To Get PCB Solutions

Since 1985, Clean Water of Northeast Wisconsin has fought for safe cleanup and disposal of PCBs in the Fox River. Located in Green Bay, Clean Water of Northeast Wisconsin is ideally situated to see the threat of PCBs to Green Bay, to the Lake, and to the lower Fox River, and it has intervened actively in the state of Wisconsin's decision-making process, while also urging inclusion of the Fox River in the U.S. EPA's Superfund program.

The Current Situation

In 1995, the U.S. EPA agreed to allow the State of Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to dredge PCB-contaminated sediments and place them in landfills. If the material put in such landfills is contaminated by more than 50 parts per million of PCBs, public notice must be given and public comments sought. (Without the EPA agreement, such materials would be required to go to an EPA-approved hazardous waste facility.)

In July, 1998, the EPA proposed that the Fox River be a Superfund site, a proposal opposed by the state government and the Fox River Group.

In December of 1998, DNR targeted the small community of Oshkosh for a PCB landfill, as part of a demonstration dredging project. The community, given only 30 days to respond, organized quickly and successfully opposed the landfill. In May of 1999, the Fort James corporation, a paper producer and one of the sources of PCBs in the Fox River, joined with DNR to propose a PCB landfill on its property, for which the corporation would be responsible.

Demonstration dredging was carried out at another site on the River, to be carried out by the paper industry working with DNR. Clean Water of Northeast Wisconsin argued that there is no need for a demonstration, and that the intent is to delay a real cleanup process, and perhaps even to demonstrate failure, thus increasing public concern about dredging. Clean Water of Northeast Wisconsin also noted that the demonstration will not test a variety of PCB elimination or detoxification technologies that could be used there; instead, the sediments will be landfilled.

Clean Water of Northeast Wisconsin takes the position that "Citizens need to push for strong clean-up standards, not just a partial, cut-rate clean-up arranged to save the polluters' time and money." Believing that the state government is overly influenced by the paper corporations that dumped the PCBs, Clean Water of Northeast Wisconsin continues to push for Superfund designation, while also working to prevent delay and unsafe solutions.

The "demonstration" dredging operation directed by the paper mills did indeed lead to what a U.S. government agency calls "an environmental emergency," as PCBs in the river sediments have been moved to the surface. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stated that the "newly exposed PCB-contaminated sediments can be reasonably expected to migrate both downstream ... and upstream

... and cause further injuries to natural resources," and called for the U.S. EPA to immediately take over the dredging operation, secure the area, and complete the job. For a [graphic illustration of the damage](#) done by the botched dredging, visit the Clean Water Action Council's website.

In the spring of 2000, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency came to a legal agreement with the Fort James Paper Corporation, so that Fort James will continue dredging of PCBs from paper mill operations on the Fox River. This dredging was left dangerously incomplete last fall. Clean Water Action Council of N.E. Wisconsin, while welcoming the resumption of dredging, has raised serious concerns about the decision, including:

- The dredging will leave one-third of the 120,000 cubic yard "hotspot" in the river, yet will end Fort James' liability for these and future contaminated materials in the hotspot.
- Dredging spoils will be placed without any detoxification on a landfill in the Oneida Nation territory.
- The EPA's cleanup goal, no more than 1 ppm (parts per million) PCBs, is 4 times higher than the original goal for the spot.
- EPA will require post-dredging cover of at least 6 inches of sand if the remaining PCBs are between 1 and 10 ppm, essentially endorsing a cap instead of a total cleanup.

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[Appleton Public Library Website on PCBs and the Fox River](#)

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I P E N

PCB Working Group

Communities Respond to PCB Contamination

The Hudson River, New York, U.S.A.

History of PCB Contamination

Beginning around 1947, the General Electric Corporation (GE) used PCBs in the production of electric capacitors at its Hudson Falls and Fort Edward plants, located on the Hudson River in upstate New York. PCBs were released from the plant on a daily basis through pipes running into the Hudson River, and also escaped into the shale bedrock into which the GE facilities were built. [Hudson River Sloop Clearwater](#), a New York environmental organization, notes that in the late 1930s, after an early study indicated health risks of PCBs, "G.E. briefly considered dropping the use of PCBs ..." However, GE did not discontinue the use of PCBs until they were banned in 1977.

At that time, there were, Clearwater reports, "1.3 million pounds of PCBs in the Hudson River, and a similar amount waiting to be discovered in the geology beneath the two plants." The PCBs in the Hudson River largely settled in an area known as the Thompson Island Pool, where most of the "hot spots" with sediments contaminated with over 50 parts per million of PCBs are still located today. An [EPA on-site study](#) released in 1998 showed that sediments from that area continue to enter the river. Once they enter the river, they also enter the Hudson Valley's food chain. Another Hudson Valley environmental organization, [Scenic Hudson](#), notes that "for every day of 'no action,' another 1.5 pounds of PCBs enters the water from the sediment hot spots." Scenic Hudson has also identified 25 [Forgotten PCB Dump Sites of the Upper Hudson Valley](#) in a 1997 study by that name. These dump sites are estimated by Scenic Hudson to contain 7 million pounds of PCBs, and, the study stated, "15 of them are considered a 'significant threat' by New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation."

In 1976, New York State banned long-standing commercial fishing operations and private fishing on the Hudson. In 1995, recreational fishing was permitted again, but only on a catch and release basis. In 1983, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declared a 200-mile stretch of the Hudson to be a Superfund site, making it the largest single Superfund site. The EPA maintains a [Web site](#) devoted to Hudson Valley PCBs. EPA Administrator Carol Browner emphasized in a 1998 [speech](#) to the New York State Assembly that PCBs in the Hudson continue to be a "serious threat to public health and the environment ..." and that

"If we had applied GE's logic that before any action can be taken, every single study -- not just the overwhelming majority, but every single study -- must be conclusive, we would not have been able to make the decision when we did to ban lead in gasoline and paint -- and a whole generation of American children would have suffered needlessly."

About the Community

The [Hudson River Valley](#) runs from the Adirondack Mountains to New York City. It has been a highly-populated area throughout its known history, beginning with a substantial indigenous population of Algonquian-speaking peoples, including the Mahicans and the [Lenape](#), before Europeans entered the area.

The devastating continuing impact of PCBs on today's Hudson Valley wildlife is an ironic note, since it was the healthy diversity of wildlife in the area that attracted European fur traders in the 1600s and began the economic exploitation of the area. That exploitation led to the European settlement of the area, and ultimately to the decimation and forced migration of the indigenous residents of the Hudson Valley, some of whose remaining ancestors are scattered as far away as Oklahoma and Ontario.

Many key events in U.S. history occurred in the Hudson Valley, reported to have more historic sites than any other part of the nation. Legends of the Hudson Valley, like that of Rip Van Winkle, have become popular stories. One family closely associated with the Hudson Valley includes two of the best-known Presidents of the U.S., Franklin D. Roosevelt and Theodore Roosevelt.

The Hudson River provides drinking water, recreation, and hydroelectric power for a region with a population of millions, including New York City, the largest city in the U.S.A. The River supports substantial agricultural and industrial activity in the entire Hudson Valley.

The W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center of Albany, New York, was created along with the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation in a [historic environmental justice settlement](#) in 1998. The Center has noted that of all the residents of the Hudson River Valley, the ones with the greatest "risk to exposure to PCBs are subsistence anglers, those who fish and eat their catch." In 1998, a New York State Department of Environmental Conservation survey found that many such people were not aware of risks from PCBs, and a 1993 [Clearwater survey](#) found most fish caught at twenty popular Hudson River fishing spots were going to be eaten, especially when caught by low-income people. The current advisory to people fishing is only given to licensed anglers, and fishing in major portions of the Hudson does not require a license. In addition, the W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center found, "The current advisory is complicated and inappropriate for the current subsistence fishing community. Currently the fishing advisory is widely distributed in English; however, communities of color, European and Asian immigrants are not clearly reflected culturally in the advisories." These communities are not only less likely to be aware of the risks but more likely, for cultural reasons and out of economic necessity, to engage in subsistence fishing.

What the Community Has Done To Get PCB Solutions

Every step of the response to PCBs in the Hudson Valley has been a result of community pressure for cleanup. GE argues that it "has obeyed the law, complied with every government order and met every regulatory commitment." In fact, GE has a massive lobbying effort in place to challenge government orders and regulatory requirements, as well as to change the overall federal legislative environment of Superfund.

As Clearwater states on its Web site,

"With a deliberate written strategy G.E. has engaged in a concerted delaying action that

has succeeded in holding off a river cleanup for more than 20 years. Time works in GE's favor. It postpones the day when hundreds of millions will have to be spent on a cleanup, and buys time for a group of well-connected GE lobbyists in Washington, DC, to work overtime at eroding the cleanup law itself."

GE represents perhaps the most sophisticated response by a corporate polluter to the PCB issue, and other corporate polluters can be expected to learn from and perhaps copy its approach. GE's version of events in the Hudson Valley and of various scientific and environmental issues can be seen on its Web site devoted to PCBs and the Hudson River, [Hudsonwatch](#),

The Current Situation

The EPA has made a commitment to propose a plan in December, 2000 as to what should be done about Hudson River PCBs. A Superfund Record of Decision, the official decision of the U.S. government to carry out this plan will then be rendered in June 2001, according to EPA. Both GE and community and environmental groups are working hard to get their messages across the people of the Hudson River Valley. At a round of GE community meetings in June 1999, for example, a broad coalition of environmental groups, including the groups listed at the end of this Web page, made their presence and their concerns known, attacking GE's tactics of delay and asserting the need for a genuine clean-up of the Hudson's PCBs. At the same time, radio ads prepared by the [Atlantic Chapter of the Sierra Club](#), dating GE's delay back to the time of the premiere of the film [The Empire Strikes Back](#), were broadcast in the Albany area.

Besides keeping the pressure on GE and federal and state regulators for a cleanup, community groups have been concerned about minimizing the health effects of Hudson River PCBs. The Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation is working with the EPA and the State of New York to reach out to communities of color and immigrant communities with education about PCBs in Hudson River fish. The Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation has also called for increased health studies, studies of the river, and organized community outreach around river issues, as well as for continued cleanup of the river sediments.

In November of 1999, General Electric was sued by New York State's Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, with strong support from Hudson Valley environmental groups. The [lawsuit](#) seeks economic damages and to force GE to pay for the dredging of the state-maintained Champlain Canal. The 35-mile waterway between at times runs parallel to the Hudson and at others is part of the river, which is severely contaminated with PCBs. The suit seeks to establish GE's accountability for PCB contamination.

In April 2000, General Electric Corporation held its annual shareholders meeting in Richmond, Virginia, a conservative smaller city in the southern U.S., probably to avoid controversy. But the controversy of the PCBs GE released into the Hudson and Housatonic Rivers, in the northern U.S., followed GE to Richmond. Two resolutions on PCBs were put before GE shareholders. One called for a GE public education program on PCB-contaminated fish, as well as a GE plan to end further PCB contamination. The second would have required GE to account for their PCB-related expenditures on lobbying and public relations/media, as compared to actual PCB remediation. The resolutions had support from faith groups, government agencies in New York, and labor unions who had come to raise their own issues at the meeting.

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I P E N

PCB Working Group

Communities Respond to PCB Contamination

Pittsfield Massachusetts USA

History of PCB Contamination

General Electric manufactured transformers in Pittsfield from early in the 20th century, and used PCBs there from the 1930s until they were banned. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found in its [investigation of the area](#) that PCBs were dumped in the area and released in accidents, and that PCB-contaminated soils were used as fill for residential, school and other construction and on the banks of the Housatonic River. Contamination along the Housatonic roughly coincides with the river's 10-year flood plain. According the *Berkshire Eagle*, the local newspaper, "The river's mud has some of the highest PCB contamination of any American river and its fish show the highest PCB burdens anywhere in the country."

On August 27, 1999, the *Berkshire Eagle* reported that:

"PCB levels in ducks collected along the Housatonic River near Woods Pond last fall by the Environmental Protection Agency were among the highest biologists have ever seen --- hundreds of times higher than the federal government considers safe to eat."

In the same article, Thomas Keefe, the western district manager of the Division of Fisheries & Wildlife, which owns the 818-acre Housatonic Valley Wildlife Management Area, was quoted

"If this is any indication of how this chemical compound has permeated that ecosystem, it's extraordinary."

About the Community

Pittsfield is located in the Berkshire Mountains, in an area once lived in by the Mahicans and other peoples whose livelihood depended on the rich harvest of fish from the Housatonic and its tributaries. After European settlement in the 1720s and the displacement of the indigenous people, the area was among the earliest in the United States to industrialize. Dams, water powered mills and transportation by river and canal were key to this process, and began the process of damaging the area's waterways.

Since the founding of the Stanley Electric Manufacturing Company in 1891, whose products first made long-distance electric transmission possible, Pittsfield has been a center of electrical equipment manufacturing. Today, Pittsfield is an industrial and commercial city with a population of about 48,000. The Berkshire Mountains and the valley of the Housatonic River, which runs south into Connecticut, are popular scenic and tourist areas, though [one travel writer](#) writes of the Housatonic, now less abused in many ways, that "its only incurable scar is PCB contamination of the river sediment caused by a General Electric plant in Massachusetts."

What the Community Has Done To Get PCB Solutions

Beginning in 1992, the [Housatonic River Initiative](#) organized for a serious cleanup of the Housatonic PCB contamination. In 1996, after PCB contamination of residential fill became known, Citizens for PCB Removal was formed, and successfully fought for remediation of PCB-contaminated material in Pittsfield . This work has led to the discovery of over 150 contaminated properties and the clean-up of over 60 homes so far.

The Current Situation

In October 1999, General Electric and the U.S. EPA signed a [consent decree](#) - a legal agreement - worked out behind closed doors. The negotiations are based on an [agreement in principle](#) of October 1998. As of early November 1999, local activists and community groups are still studying the extremely lengthy text of the agreement. What is known of the agreement represents some real progress, including cleanup of PCB contamination of the Allendale School, which is next to General Electric's Pittsfield facility. However, another feature of the agreement, according to information made available to the Housatonic River Initiative, is a PCB dump, without a liner or other underground protection, next to the school, on the site of already existing PCB contamination. In addition, the decree would result in what the Housatonic River Initiative calls "the rug in the river" - a plastic sheet on the bed of the Housatonic from shore to shore for the purpose of containing the PCBs in the sediment. Finally, the agreement covers only the first 1.5 miles of the Housatonic below the General Electric plant.

The [Housatonic River Initiative](#) continues to press for "a settlement we can live with" that doesn't include efforts to sweep a long history of PCB contamination under the rug.

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Note: This page is based on information from the Housatonic River Initiative, the U.S. EPA, and the General Electric Corporation.

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Abandoned PCBs: The Communities of Porvenir and Perote, Mexico

Since 1998, two communities in Mexico have taken action to deal with essentially abandoned stocks of PCBs formerly used by the Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE), the national electrical utility. In both cases, local communities have worked closely with national nongovernmental organizations to try to correct not only the immediate problem, but the much larger problem of uncontrolled POPs (persistent organic pollutants) that the abandoned PCBs represent.

Porvenir

The first of the two communities to become aware of its PCBs problem was Porvenir, a community of about 10,000 people located about 80 kilometers from Ciudad Juarez, which is on the border with the U.S. In October, 1998, residents held a meeting to protest the presence of about 400 barrels of PCBs, located at the site of a former electric substation. The PCBs had been brought to the site in the early 1980s. Since that time, residents had noted a number of birth defects in the surrounding area.

The CFE told the residents that the site, which they called a temporary storage site for the PCBs, did not represent any risk to the community. The national environmental agency (known as PROFEPA) stated that it had not been aware of the PCBs, but agreed that they did not represent a risk.

However, the community organized and put pressure on CFE, as a result of which the barrels were moved in May of 1999 to the community of Pailas in the neighboring state of Coahuila.

The site where the PCBs were stored in Porvenir was contaminated by PCBs, and cleanup of the site has not taken place as of this writing.

Perote

Also in 1998, in a rural area near the town of Perote, local authorities became aware of a CFE storage site, but not, at first, of the risks it put on the community.

Perote, like Porvenir, is in a historically agricultural area. It is in the eastern coastal state of Veracruz, but in a hilly inland area. While fighting a forest fire, local emergency personnel became aware of helicopter surveillance of a warehouse in the area, and that the material in the warehouse was "askarel," a trade name for a PCBs mixture. Over the next year, local officials tried to find out more, but got only evasive responses from CFE.

In October, 1999, there was massive flooding in Veracruz and other areas of Mexico. Soon afterwards, it became evident that the PCBs warehouse near Perote, situated in a ravine, had been flooded. On a site visit in November, local and federal officials found that the flooding had left the warehouse partially unsecured, and the 1200 drums inside covered with up to 5 meters of mud and other residues. The warehouse was completely unattended.

By this time, local residents and officials had learned more about the health effects of PCBs, and were making connections between the stored toxic chemicals and birth defects in the immediate area. Local officials began to contact officials at the national and state levels to request assistance. One result was that Ecological Commission of the Legislature of the State of Veracruz, working with environmental networks from across Mexico, held a forum on POPs Feb. 28-29 in Xalapa, capital of that State. This

event provided a vehicle for protests by local citizens as well as by environmental groups, and resulted in the following demands:

- 1) a call for investigation by the national environmental agency (known as PROFEPA) of the CFE for its actions in Perote, including their impact on public health, as well as their responsibility for a non incineration method of treatment of the PCBs;
- 2) a call for the CFE to provide an inventory of PCBs in the State of Veracruz and a plan for their management, consistent with local public safety plans;
- 3) a call for a moratorium on the incineration of hazardous waste, medical waste and municipal waste, and on the use of hazardous wastes in cement kilns;
- 4) a call for the federal authorities of Mexico to take an active role in the Bonn INC negotiations for a treaty on POPs (persistent organic pollutants), and to take positions seeking the elimination of POPs, not merely their reduction or management, and also seeking cooperative mechanisms and technical and financial aid for non-incineration alternatives and clean production techniques.

At the time of this forum, in February, 2000, the site near Perote continued to be unsecured, and drums began to show signs of bulging. No cleanup had occurred.

PCBs in Mexico

The contaminated sites described above are far from the only such sites in Mexico. Several others were identified by consultants to the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, a body established by Mexico, Canada and the U.S.A. in 1994 to address transboundary environmental concerns. The consultants to the 1996 report, Status of PCB Management in North America, found likely PCB contamination at such sites as an unregulated transformer repair shop at which 50 transformers and 30 drums sat unsecured and in some cases leaking, an electric substation where dielectric fluids (almost certainly PCBs) are leaking into a sewer that discharges into a major drinking water source, and an abandoned hydroelectric plant at which three large transformers are leaking into the Mexico City water supply.

PCBs were never produced in Mexico. Most PCBs in Mexico were imported from the U.S.A. , with the total imported estimated at up to 20,000 metric tons. In 1997, Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Ecologia estimated that about 6,500 metric tons of PCBs were in use in state-owned or state-related enterprises in Mexico. Of these, over 2,000 metric tons were believed to be in use by the CFE.

Mexican law bans the final disposition of PCBs in landfills, and there are no authorized facilities in Mexico for the destruction of pure PCBs or wastes highly contaminated with PCBs. An incinerator was slated to operate in the city of Tijuana in the 1980s, but never began operating because of public protests. At this time, the plan for disposal of Mexico's PCBs is to export them for incineration. U.S. laws do not allow the import of PCBs into that country. The intended destination of Mexico's PCBs at this time is Finland, where Mexico has previously sent PCBs for incineration, but no PCBs have been shipped there for several years.

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Sources

Thanks to the Alianza Internacional Ecologista de Bravo, Ciudad Juarez, State of Chihuahua, for information on Porvenir and on PCBs in Mexico, to the Centro de Derecho Ambiental e Intergracion Economica del Sur of Xalapa, Veracruz, and to local official (Regidora) Lic. Dulce Maria Vazquez Serrano for information on Perote, and to the Red de Action sobre Plaguicidas y Alternativas en Mexico for information on PCBs and other toxics in Mexico. This article also draws on the document, Status of PCB Management in North America, published by the Commission for Environmental Cooperation in 1996.

For further information on this page, contact [Larry Yates](#) at the [Center for Health, Environment and Justice](#).

... A Voice for Health, and Environmental Justice



The **Center for Health, Environment and Justice** (CHEJ) was founded in 1981, as the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW), by Lois Gibbs community leader at Love Canal. CHEJ believes in environmental justice, the principle that people have the right to a clean and healthy environment regardless of their race or economic standing. The Center believes the most effective way to win environmental justice is from the bottom up through community organizing and empowerment. CHEJ seeks to help local citizens and organizations come together and take an organized, unified stand in order to hold industry and government accountable and work toward a healthy, environmentally sustainable future.

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