River study to locate exact dredging sites
GE's $15M mapping project marks the start of $500M PCB cleanup

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The General Electric Co. will begin a $15 million study of the Hudson River next month to map out exactly what portions of river bottom will be dredged to remove PCBs, according to an agreement reached Tuesday with federal environmental officials.

The settlement caps more than three months of negotiations between the company and the EPA and signals that the $500 million dredging project -- first proposed in December 2000 by the Clinton administration -- is finally under way.

But the company did not reimburse the government the full $37.5 million spent determining that dredging was the best course for cleaning up the river. GE will pay back $5 million and provide the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency $2.6 million to oversee the sampling work, as part of the settlement.

Both the company and the federal agency said that the $5 million figure, which the EPA referred to as a "down payment," was an attempt to get the research under way. With the summer dwindling in upstate New York, officials and environmentalists were concerned that time would run out and the project would be delayed by winter setting in.

"What we wanted to ensure was that we had an agreement to get us onto the river that would give us the opportunity to start the sampling very soon," said EPA Regional Administrator Jane M. Kenny, who signed the administrative consent order on Tuesday. "It goes into effect on Friday. "EPA continues to seek recovery from GE of all the agency's past costs," she said.

Two other consent orders -- one for design of the project, one for the cleanup itself -- still must be negotiated before dredging starts in 2005.

GE vowed to continue a cooperative role. "This agreement is concrete evidence of our good faith," company spokesman Mark Behan said.

But some environmentalists, along with U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, said the process was tainted by the current political climate. With the federal Superfund program still not reauthorized, and the Bush administration moving to shift part of the costs to taxpayers, the EPA is negotiating with empty pockets, and the company on the other side of the table has taken advantage of timing, said Hinchey, an Ulster County Democrat.

"GE is supposed to be paying full costs," said Hinchey. But "we know that the EPA is starving for funds."

Janet MacGillivray, an attorney for Garrison-based Riverkeeper, added: "Yes, the season will be saved. Yes, the sampling will begin. But sampling is a far cry from GE cleaning up the river. Based on these first indications, how can GE say with any credibility it intends to move ahead with this cleanup?"
Kenny called such talk "partisan nonsense," saying that "any projects in play, are continuing to be funded."

The settlement binds GE to taking 30,000 sediment samples along the 40-mile stretch of river slated for dredging. The company will also map the river bottom and use sound waves -- known as side-scanning sonar -- to distinguish among different sediment types and to detect submerged structures that could impede dredging.

The information gathered will help determine where the dredges will go and how deep they will excavate. Each core extracted from the river will be transported to the company's Fort Edward plant to be processed, then sent out to a private company for analysis, Behan said.

The work, which GE called the largest sampling project ever tried, will have five boats on the river 10 hours a day, obtaining 60 cores each. It's not scheduled to begin until next month and won't end until November 2003.

But it has already raised concerns in Moreau, which has a yet-to-be-constructed public boat launch that could be used for the work. Town officials, who oppose dredging, want no part of the research.

"We don't want to send a message out that we support the dredging project," said town Supervisor Harry Guthrie. "We thought the launch was going to be used solely for recreation."

Tim Havens, president of the anti-dredging group Citizen Environmentalists Against Sludge Encapsulation, said he was relieved the sampling was in GE's hands but was holding out hope that the research would determine dredging wasn't needed.

"We'll know that we'll have decent results," Havens said. But "we want the sampling to come back and say that the problem has eradicated itself."

That's unlikely, though. Similar sampling regimes have been conducted on the river before, according to Richard Bopp, an associate professor of Earth and environmental sciences at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, who has cored the river under contract to the EPA and the state.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation sampled the river in the 1970s and the 1980s. The EPA repeated some of that work in the 1990s. But this time around, he said, the work will be more specific and used to define the areas that will be removed.

U.S. Rep. John Sweeney said the EPA should screen the river bottom for all contaminants.

"I would like to see a complete analysis of the Hudson River bottom," the Clifton Park Republican lawmaker said. "I hope that the EPA will take this opportunity to do that."

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