

SEARCH

NYT Since 1981

Search

[TimesSelect](#) FREE 14-DAY TRIAL![Editorials/Op-Ed Home](#)[Editorials](#)[Columnists](#)[Contributors](#)[Letters](#)[New York/Region Opinions](#)

WESTCHESTER

Waiting for G.E.

Published: March 26, 2006

Never hold your breath waiting for actual progress in the cleanup of PCB's from the Hudson River. You'll pass out. Milestones in the river's slow recovery have been piling up for decades, at least on paper. But the chemicals haven't gone anywhere.

Polychlorinated biphenyls, the toxic chemicals deposited by General Electric factories in the upper river for decades, were banned as a cancer risk in 1977. A long struggle ensued between the company and state and federal agencies over whether and how to deal with contaminated river mud. The Environmental Protection Agency roused itself to begin investigating the issue in 1990, and 10 years later it ordered G.E. to clean up the mess.

The agency laid out its expectations for the immense project in a legally binding plan, known as the Record of Decision, in 2002. The dredging was supposed to have started last year, but complications and revised projections put off the start of work to this year, then next year. Now G.E. says it can't begin until the year after that — 2008 — at the earliest.

The news of the latest setback was contained within the pages of a huge document, the final design report for the first phase of the PCB cleanup, which G.E. submitted to the E.P.A. last Tuesday. The report, in 370 pages, with 606 pages of attachments, is the long-awaited nuts-and-bolts description of exactly how the company plans to attack the project, which is likely to be the biggest and most complex industrial cleanup in American history. It says where the clam-shell dredges will operate, where the wet mud will go, how the toxics will be separated out, how new clean fill

[E-Mail This](#)[Printer-Friendly](#)[Save Article](#)ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY**THANK YOU
FOR SMOKING**

will be deposited in the river bottom and how the shoreline and wildlife habitats will be restored.

The reason for the latest delay is that the company expects that the construction of a "dewatering facility" to separate clean water from toxic mud will take several more months than the E.P.A. predicted. Even if construction begins as planned this September, the report says, the dewatering facility cannot be finished in time for next year's dredging season, the May-to-November window when the river is free of ice.

Reading the report in all its meticulous detail (see www.epa.gov/hudson) may give you the sense that G.E. is actually serious about finally doing what its executives and lawyers have fought against for years, calling it a waste of time and money.

But it's hard to be sure. Given G.E.'s infuriating, decades-long history of foot-dragging, obfuscation and aggressive passivity regarding the PCB cleanup, hardly any amount of skepticism about the company's intentions seems unreasonable anymore.

E.P.A. officials say they are studying the document closely and will try to find a way to close the gap between their projections of a workable dredging timetable and G.E.'s. They should do so, and quickly. The agency should insist that the company back up the assumptions behind its frustratingly protracted timetable, and make sure that this latest delay is not the product of undue diligence — a willful resistance to getting on with the job.

Officials in New York with a stake in the success of the dredging project and the health of the Hudson River — that is, everybody — should join Attorney General Eliot Spitzer in urging the E.P.A. to keep G.E.'s feet to the fire. People have grown old waiting for G.E. to come around. The company and the cleanup process have moved forward over the years, but so have human evolution and continental drift.

Dredging the Hudson is a huge and essential job, and it must start soon, with visible results.

[More Articles in Opinion >](#)

RELATED ARTICLES

[New York Congressman Won't Seek 13th Term](#) (March 18, 2006)