

It's The Environment!  
Our Magnificent Rivers- The Mighty Hudson

The Hudson River flows more than 300 miles starting near the Great Lakes in upstate New York, sliding down through the Piedmont, cutting the cliffs of the New Jersey palisades, before flowing into New York Harbor at the tip of the island of Manhattan. The Hudson is a tidal estuary from Manhattan upriver to Troy, NY and has carried people and materials for as long as people have been in this part of the world- going back thousands of years. History, commerce, recreation, awe and wonder flow the length of this mighty river. Like too many of our rivers, the Hudson is also seriously contaminated through most of its length as a result of carelessness, ignorance, and sloppy practices. The problem receiving a great deal of attention now is the cleanup of contamination from polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) from the General Electric (GE) facilities on the upper Hudson.

We know the river all too well from the PCB contamination and cleanup. All fisheries, commercial and recreational were closed on the Hudson about 40 years ago when striped bass, blue crabs and other animals were found to be contaminated with PCBs from the GE plants in Fort Edward, NY and nearby. As a result, the Hudson River was listed on the Superfund list of contaminated sites, but the EPA decided that there was no real and practical way to clean up 200 miles of the Hudson. In the mid 1990's, EPA completed the next review of the original decision to take no action, but this time decided that something could and should be done to address the PCB contamination that was not improving – at least not fast enough.

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, GE built and operated several facilities to process heavy duty transformers that are used in electrical transmission and in industrial facilities. The PCBs came into play as insulating fluids in the transformers. But PCBs have turned out to be highly toxic, as well as accumulative and persistent (i.e., levels concentrate as they move up a food chain and the chemicals do not break down naturally or easily over time). PCBs do not dissolve well in water, but do dissolve in fats and oils. Information on PCB toxicity is found on the [ESC website](#) (see [resources](#)) and the links to the websites for [EPA](#) and [ATSDR](#) (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry). PCBs are one of the common contaminants at Superfund sites around the country.

The natural wonders of this magnificent and historic river are tainted by the PCBs released from the GE facilities upstream. Mind you, the historical features, such as its role in the revolutionary war and the French and Indian War, are not diminished. Further, the Hudson remains the subject of recent authors, as depicted in "My River

Chronicles (by Jessica DuLong).” But lurking beneath most of the Hudson River waters are the contaminants left behind.

At least now, there is cleanup under way with EPA oversight, close monitoring from the state of New York, and the involvement of communities and citizen groups on the river. From Natural Resources Defense Council, Scenic Hudson, the Hudson Riverkeeper (which happens to be the first Riverkeeper group in the nation) to Hudson River Sloop Clearwater (for which ESC, LLC acts as a contracted technical advisor for the cleanup), the environmental community is closely watching all aspects of the work.

It’s a good thing that the Hudson gets so much attention because the problems have been so great and GE so resistant to carrying out their responsibility. After all, GE spent millions of dollars on a public relations campaign in an attempt to avoid the current remediation. The company then only agreed to start work if EPA would agree to review the first year of work and assess if the dredging was effective before continuing. Those steps are behind us now, and work proceeds apace. In fact, GE has increased the equipment used in the dredging and sediment processing to the point that work may be finished ahead of the original schedule.

The experience on the Hudson River presents an abundance of lessons for all who are facing problems related to contaminated rivers, especially the Housatonic River in Massachusetts and Connecticut-also a GE contaminated river. Other communities are hearing the same script that GE used unsuccessfully on the Hudson, which is that cleaning the river will make the mess worse. This line or argument is simply false and a blatant attempt to avoid responsibility. Were we not all told as kids to clean up after ourselves?

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