



FRIENDS
OF THE LAKE

Housatonic River Ranked Among Most Endangered

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The Housatonic River, which flows through Connecticut to Long Island Sound from the Massachusetts border, is seventh on a national conservation group's list of the 10 most endangered rivers in the United States.

The group, American Rivers, said the Housatonic was included on this year's list because critical decisions are expected to be made in the coming months about cleaning up toxic PCB's downriver from an old General Electric transformer factory in Pittsfield, Mass.

"Irresponsible industrial activity has left the floodplain and river bottom of the Housatonic River contaminated with some of the highest levels of PCB's in the nation," says the report by American Rivers, which is to be released today. "Unless the Environmental Protection Agency orders a cleanup of the remaining contamination, General Electric Company's toxic legacy in the Housatonic will remain a major health hazard for generations to come."

Parts of the river were heavily contaminated by tons of PCB's that came from the G.E. plant before 1977, when the chemical was banned.



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Studies showed that fish, ducks and other animals were so heavily contaminated with PCB's, polychlorinated biphenyls, that eating them would substantially increase the risk of getting cancer or other diseases.

Over the last five years, G.E. and the federal Environmental Protection Agency have removed contaminated mud from a mile of river adjacent to and south of the plant. The company, which has so far spent more than \$260 million on cleaning the river and upland areas nearby, is helping to pay for decontaminating the next mile of heavily polluted river bottom.

Attention is now turning to the remaining 147 miles of river, where the contamination is less severe than in the waters closest to the plant. The Housatonic is heavily fished, although there is a ban on consumption. And since the river empties into Long Island Sound, removing the remaining pollutants is a priority, especially where it settles behind at least six dams.

By the end of this year, the federal agency has said it will complete assessments of public health risks and ecological dangers linked to river contamination. It is also calculating how the remaining pollutants might be dispersed if they are not removed.

Once those studies are complete, G.E. will propose a number of cleanup options for the rest of the river, including leaving the PCB's in place. After public hearings, the federal agency will a final decision, probably by 2007.



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Timothy M. Conway, a lawyer for the E.P.A.'s Region 1 office who is working on the Housatonic cleanup, said the next few years would be critical in determining the river's long-term recovery.

"We've devoted an awful lot of brainpower and resources and people's time to making this project as fair and thorough as possible," Mr. Conway said. "We plan to continue that, and we think that our efforts speak for themselves."

Not everyone is pleased with all aspects of the project, or the direction it is heading. Timothy W. Gray, executive director of the Housatonic River Initiative, a group concerned with the health of the river, said that with the cleanup of the first mile now complete, it was important that G.E. not try to wash its hands of responsibility for the rest of the river.

"We intend to do everything in our power to help the E.P.A. make the right decisions about cleaning up the rest of the PCB's," Mr. Gray said.

Gary F. Sheffer, a G.E. spokesman, said the company reached an agreement with the federal government and the states in 2000 that lays out precisely what happens next.

"There's a process that will determine, based on science, what's best for the river," Mr. Sheffer said, "and the E.P.A. leads that process."



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The company is also involved in another project to clean up tons of PCB's from a 40-mile stretch of the Hudson River. But that project is so much larger than the work on the Housatonic that the company and environmental officials consider them more dissimilar than alike.

This is the first year, since American Rivers started releasing a most endangered rivers list in 1986, that a Connecticut waterway has been included. The other rivers on this year's list are, in order - Colorado, Big Sunflower, Snake, Tennessee, the Allegheny and Monongahela combined, Spokane, Peace, Big Darby Creek and Mississippi