

HRI

Newsletter

WOODS POND, LENOX, MASSACHUSETTS

THE REST OF THE RIVER

Now that GE is close to completing the PCB clean up of the first half-mile of the most industrialized section of the Housatonic, the EPA is getting ready to begin clean up activities in the next mile and a half. We at HRI are working on several fronts to get ready to win the battle of the rest of the river.

When HRI began its advocacy in 1992 removing the PCBs from the river was an ambitious dream. Many people suggested that we would never be able to hold GE accountable for years of PCB dumping. After a decade of tireless advocacy the Housatonic River clean up, combined with the Pittsfield residential and commercial clean up, has resulted in one of the most ambitious PCB clean up programs ever undertaken by state and federal environmental agencies.

Now the focus turns to the “rest of the river.”

Even though the PCB clean up is well underway, the settlement between GE and the Environmental Agencies delayed the decision on whether to clean up what EPA now calls the “rest of the river.” This decision will probably be made in 2004 – 2005. We at HRI are determined to continue our advocacy for a fishable, swimmable river.

We can expect General Electric to barrage the community with a public relations campaign. We witnessed this in the Berkshire Eagle when the site was nominated for the

Superfund program. We also saw the very slick and expensive TV ads GE ran to try to stop the clean up of the Hudson River.

GE will once again try to tell us that dredging the PCBs will stir them up. But we now know that the PCBs get stirred up every year during major flood events.

As in their Hudson River commercials GE will maintain that the wildlife is not in danger. They will say cleaning up the PCBs will do more harm to the wildlife. But we already know all is not well in the rest of the river. The fish have some of the highest levels of PCBs found in any body of water in the United States. Last year the ducks were found to have some of the highest levels of PCBs ever recorded.

If GE is forced to clean up the "rest of the river" they will no doubt be looking for a dump site in South County to deposit the PCBs. Sadly the City of Pittsfield is letting GE dump their PCBs in an existing highly contaminated landfill and a second new landfill both directly across from the Allendale Elementary School. We must not allow this to happen in South County!

Treatment methods exist to destroy the PCBs. We must insist that the options for treatment are understood and that we use the best available technology to treat the PCBs. (See article on treatment technology.) Landfilling is at best a temporary solution and by using landfills we are only deferring the problem to a future generation.

The first half mile of the Housatonic River is clean. It can no longer be argued that removal of the PCBs cannot be accomplished. We ask all of our supporters to begin the campaign for the cleanup of the "rest of the river." Let's all work together to get the river clean!

EDUCATING TWO GENERATIONS : HRI'S CONTINUING COMMITMENT TO EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH

When HRI was formed in 1992, one of the first committees we formed was the Education Committee. At the time, we knew two things:

1) we had to become educated about PCBs and the threat to public health and the environment and 2) we had to go out into the community and spread the word.

In those days, we were all much too dependent on GE and its contractors for information. HRI spoke to GE workers and started the long and complicated process of reading all the technical reports, and reaching out to experts everywhere and to other contaminated communities. And then we started to share what we learned with other community groups and went into the schools.

Here's a list of some of our most recent educational activity during 2001 and 2002:

Pittsfield Public Schools
Dalton Public Schools – Two day seminar "River Days"
Berkshire Community College
Harvard University School of Public Health
Williams College
Simon's Rock College
Bard College
Mt. Everett School, Sheffield

Lee Public Schools
Lenox Elementary School
Hotchkiss School
Housatonic River Commission- Ct.
Earth Day Festival - Great Barrington
Unitarian Church - Pittsfield
Unitarian Church - Great Barrington
Trout Unlimited
Berkshire County League of Sportsman
Hudson River Groups

If you're a member of a local or regional community group, or a teacher or parent or student, and would like HRI to come and make a presentation, please call Tim Gray at 243-3353.



HRI & TUFTS UNIVERSITY HOLD IMPORTANT CONFERENCES ON HEATH AND TREATMENT TECHNOLOGIES

CAN PCBs IN THE AIR ENTER OUR BODIES?

On February 22, 2002, HRI and Tufts University sponsored a forum on PCBs and Health Effects. Dr. David Carpenter of the School for Public Health at SUNY/Albany made a report about some of the preliminary data his team collected in Pittsfield. He stated:

“What I’m going to present to you today is a very preliminary study – it’s not been published. ... But let me say a little bit about the hypothesis ... That hypothesis is that inhalation of PCBs is a major route of exposure. ... Now most people would tell you consumption of contaminated fish is the major route of exposure to PCBs. ... I wouldn’t deny that at all. For those people that eat contaminated fish, you can get a body burden with just a few meals that certainly exceeds that that one’s going to get by living near contamin-ated sites, dermal absorption, breathing in, that sort of thing.

“That’s not really the question though because most people [here] never ate the fish. This is true around the Hudson as well. The real question is what are the levels in those people and are the levels of PCBs in those people sufficiently high to cause disease. Now I can’t answer all those questions.

“What we’ve done is a few preliminary studies on a relatively few people in a relatively few houses that looked at the air levels in the basement and in the living room and outside the home and looked at the PCB levels in the people.

“We had blood from 21 people. The median total PCB concentration was 4.2 nanograms per gram, 4.2 ppb. ... Now if you look at the 2000 Tox Profile, ATSDR says that unexposed populations will have PCB levels between 0.9 and 1.5 ppb. There really hasn’t been a current study of truly unexposed people. ... I see [the Pittsfield levels] as being elevated. It’s not sky high.

“These are a mean of 21 people between 1.4 and 11.2. For people that have no identifiable risk of exposure I see that as being elevated probably by a factor of somewhere between two and four-fold.”

“The indoor air in the basement averaged 20.3 nanograms per cubic meter. Now ambient PCB levels anywhere in the world away from contaminated sites will be about 1 nanogram per cubic meter. So that’s elevated. Now the living-room, the average was 11, and the outdoor air was 3. So the outdoor air was slightly higher than you would have in a totally pristine area, but you go in the middle of almost any major city and you’re going to get levels that are of this kind of value. Now these values again, I see as being somewhat elevated but I think there are a lot of people who will argue with me about that.

“There is an OSHA standard for indoor PCBs in air for 8-hour working days of 1,000 nanograms per cubic meter. Actually the paper that I mentioned earlier ... was a study of rats exposed to volatile PCBs at a concentration of 700 nanograms per cubic meter and in that publication there was significant accumulation in the animals.

“There was thyroid pathology. There was bladder pathology, and clearly there was a demonstration that volatile PCBs could be breathed in by an animal to a degree that could cause pathologic changes, and that this was at a level lower than the OSHA standard.”

Beside learning about the possible threat from airborne, volatilized PCBs, one of the most important things we learned from Dr. Carpenter’s presentation is that the federal Agency for Toxic Substances now believes that the background level for PCBs in human blood – the level all of us who have not worked with PCBs carry around with us in our body – is much, much lower than we were told by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH). For its Housatonic River PCB study MDPH gave blood tests to 69 people: “Total serum PCBs ... ranged from non-detectable to 35.81 ppb, with a mean of 5.44 ppb and a median of 3.93 ppb.” (Page 20.) MDPH stated:

“The serum PCB levels found among participants of both studies were generally within typical background estimates for a non-occupationally exposed U.S. population. ATSDR reports that, for U.S. populations without occupational exposure, mean serum PCB levels were usually between 4 and 8 ppb, with 95% of the individuals having concentrations less than 20 ppb. Since the results of this study represented individuals with the highest risk of exposure, it is reasonable to assume that

serum PCB levels of most non-occupationally exposed residents in the HRA communities are within the US background range, though individual differences may likely occur.” (MDPH, Page 2, emphasis added.)

Instead of 4 to 8 ppb, the current background level is 0.9 to 1.5 ppb. You do the math.



SOME OF THE REST OF THE RIVER

The second conference explored remedial treatment options for PCBs.

SAFE REMOVAL; SAFE DISPOSAL

HRI Board Member Benno Friedman reports:

In approximately three years, the two miles of the river downstream of the General Electric facility will have been dredged. Despite The Initiative' s objections, the PCBs will have been placed in a recently created dump site, adjacent to a school and deep in the heart of residential Pittsfield. And as dirt swept under the rug remains under the rug, so too the PCB' s will remain, needing to be monitored for the next several hundred years as we hope the landfill doesn' t leak.



GE LANDFILL AT HILL 78 ACROSS FROM THE ALLENDALE SCHOOL

Unfortunately for all of us, the landfill that doesn't leak has probably not been built. This solution is far from ideal and cannot be allowed to be repeated elsewhere in our communities. Our sights must now be turned downstream towards the rest of the river, also loaded with PCBs. Will they ultimately be removed and if so, will they end up in another, as yet to be created dumpsite?

These are the two fundamental questions critical to the long term health of the river and all forms of life interacting with it, be it for recreation or for sustenance: 1) how much of the remaining PCB's in and near the river will be removed and 2) what will become of them once they are removed? Last March, the Housatonic River Initiative hosted a one day symposium on the treatment and remediation options of PCBs in the Housatonic River.

Present were an array of experts from the public and private sectors, vendors of established, proven treatment technologies and academics working on promising, experimental strategies. A detailed account of their presentations is in the process of being prepared and will be available by year's end. The short answer: a number of technologies currently exist that can safely, effectively treat PCB tainted sediment in the Housatonic, rendering it harmless forever. To treat or to landfill is no longer a scientific or technological issue, only needing to be fine tuned to the specifics of the Housatonic. Politics, advertising and the lack or existence of a collective will: these are to be the deciding factors. We have the ability to influence the outcome, to help craft the fate of our river. Otherwise it will most certainly be chosen for us. By General Electric and by the EPA. The fight for our river is far from over.

**Help us save money: receive your
newsletter via E-mail.**

**Please let Tim Gray
know at:**

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Waterkeeper Alliance Annual Conference Held at Salt Lake City Olympic Village

In June, Tim Gray, Housatonic River-keeper, attended the Waterkeeper Alliance annual conference with over 60 other keepers. Waterkeeper Alliance President Robert Kennedy Jr. kicked off the four-day conference by introducing all the keepers from around the world. There were Riverkeepers, Lakekeepers, Coast-keepers, and Soundkeepers all engaged in a similar mission to protect their respective bodies of water from polluters. Tim Gray said "it was exciting to see the Waterkeeper movement spread into South America, Europe, and even a prospective keeper from Czechoslovakia."

The conference started with a rigorous session on what it means to be a Waterkeeper. Both veteran and new programs participated in the roundtable discussion. A new mission statement for the Alliance was created in a focus session led by the Long Island Soundkeeper. The new Waterkeeper licenses and protection of the water keeper trademark were discussed.

Break out sessions were held on stormwater management, Power Plant regulations, gathering evidence, strategies to try before litigation, fundraising, pollution permits, and many other topics.

Riverkeeper Launch: June 4-5, 2003

Next spring HRI will hold a "Housatonic Riverkeeper Launch Day" with Robert Kennedy Jr., President of the Waterkeeper Alliance presiding over the days activities. A launch is the traditional celebration of the Waterkeeper Alliance to welcome new licensed Riverkeeper programs. Stay tuned for details!!

Check out the Alliance's Web site at www.waterkeeper.org

Check Out HRI's website at Housatonic-River.com. You will find history, information about HRI events, HRI reports, links galore and more. If you have suggestions on how to make it better e-mail timgray@berkshire.net

HRI exists on a tiny budget; and we donate hundreds and hundreds of hours of work. Please support our important advocacy by donating whatever you can.

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**HRI:
WORKING
FOR A FISHABLE,
SWIMMABLE
HOUSATONIC
SINCE 1992**

