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Attack Further Delays a Final Decision on Hudson Dredging

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

WASHINGTON, Sept. 21 — The terrorist attack in New York has further delayed the Environmental Protection Agency's final decision on a $460 million plan for General Electric to dredge the Hudson River of poisonous chemicals.

Christie Whitman, the agency's administrator, was scheduled to issue a final decision on the project on Thursday. But the decision was delayed even before the terrorist attack Sept. 11 on the World Trade Center. The attack then forced the agency to evacuate its New York regional offices, which are four blocks from the World Trade Center, and only today was any employee allowed to re-enter the offices.

Tina Kreisher, a spokeswoman for the E.P.A., said the timetable for the Hudson cleanup had been complicated because many of the records on the case were in the New York regional office.

The agency was supposed to send its draft "record of decision" to state and federal agencies by Sept. 4 and then give those agencies 15 days to respond before issuing its final decision. That 15-day process has yet to begin, and now, with the disruption caused by the attack, the final decision will be delayed at least until next month.

Mrs. Whitman announced her intention to support the dredging plan on Aug. 1, but several opponents vowed to kill it one way or another. Since then, although the public comment period on the proposal has ended, the agency has been discussing details of the dredging with several groups, including General Electric, which adamantly opposes the plan.

The plan would force G.E., which for decades dumped polychlorinated biphenyls, known as PCB's, into a 40-mile stretch of the Hudson north of Albany, to spend $460 million to dredge the river. The chemicals are used in electrical transformers.

Stephen D. Ramsey, G.E.'s vice president for environmental programs, has met with Eileen McGinnis, Mrs. Whitman's chief of staff. Ms. Kreisher said Ms. McGinnis had also heard from Gov. George E. Pataki of New York, who favors the dredging, as well as from officials from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Mark Behan, a spokesman for G.E., would not comment on Mr. Ramsey's meeting.

Ms. Kreisher said the agency was also setting up a meeting with environmental groups. "We're in a listening mode," she said. "We are always willing to review additional information, even though the comment period is over."

Some environmental groups are worried, however, that the delays mean that G.E. is working to undermine the plan. Laura Haight, a senior environmental associate with the New York Public Interest Research Group, said, "Regardless of the cause of the delay, it puts the cleanup of the Hudson River at risk."

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