



HOUSATONIC RIVER CLEANUP STATEMENT

Mass Audubon supports a strong and unambiguous Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) permit for the cleanup of PCB contamination in the Housatonic River, caused by the General Electric complex in Pittsfield. In particular, we commend the Agency for requiring removal of large amounts of contaminated material from the Housatonic River Valley.

We have filed briefs with the EPA's Environmental Appeals Board in support of the Agency's requirement for off-site disposal of PCBs at a licensed, hazardous waste facility (out of state). Mass Audubon also supports the dredging of Woods Pond in Lenox, where PCBs have settled for generations behind a dam on the river. Removal of contaminated material from the pond is a vital component of containing and reducing PCB contamination in this dynamic river system. We also support the permit requirements for compliance with the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act, as cleanup activities will impact habitats of several state-listed rare plants and animals.

Mass Audubon urges that the final EPA permit make it clear that GE will be responsible in perpetuity for managing the persistent environmental contamination that will remain even after the cleanup. Furthermore, the final permit must ensure that affected communities and landowners have input into the details of the cleanup plan, including access routes, material staging areas, and environmental monitoring.

Background: GE polluted the Housatonic River and surrounding lands over several decades with hundreds of tons of PCBs—toxic and persistent chemicals used in the manufacture of electrical transformers—which pose threats to human health and wildlife. Efforts to clean up this environmental disaster have been ongoing since the 1980s, and the “Rest of River” (an administrative term designating the river below Pittsfield) cleanup under this permit will take an estimated 13 years.

Even after the cleanup is completed, PCBs will remain present throughout extensive lands along and near the river, which feature many different ownerships both in Massachusetts and downstream in Connecticut. The chemicals will persist for many decades, likely even hundreds of years.

As a directly impacted landowner—our Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary is located on the river in Pittsfield—Mass Audubon has been closely engaged in the planning process for the cleanup for many years. Canoe Meadows is located at the head of the “Rest of River,” where the methods for the cleanup will first be applied, and this sanctuary contains habitat that supports numerous rare and common species of plants and animals.

And as a statewide conservation organization, we have a broader interest in the conservation and restoration of the Housatonic River Valley ecosystem for the benefit of both people and wildlife.

The Housatonic River Valley features tremendous ecological, scenic, tourism, and community values and it is vital that these be protected and restored. Mass Audubon stands with the affected communities and other interested public and private groups in supporting a strong EPA permit governing the implementation of this crucial environmental cleanup project, which may well affect Massachusetts and the Northeast for centuries.