

## Study of Hudson River contamination serves as a cautionary tale



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A view of the Hudson River, looking north from the Walkway Over the Hudson, a footbridge that spans the river near Poughkeepsie.

The Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz has published a new study that details the history of chemical pollution in the Hudson River and the state and federal policies aimed at rectifying decades of contamination.

The story of the Hudson River serves as [a cautionary tale](#) about preventing chemical pollution in our water before it reaches the crisis stage. The lesson of the 24-page study is that prevention is far better, and far cheaper, than cleanup.

The discussion brief, "[Hudson River PCBs: What the GE Clean-Up Brings to Life.](#)" tells the story of the pollution of the river and the subsequent fight for remediation.

Authored by Simon Litten of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Water (retired), the study draws valuable policy lessons about the importance of preventing chemical pollution before crises develop, like those more recent incidents in the [village of Hoosick Falls](#) and the [city of Newburgh](#). Both communities are struggling with water contamination by perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), and perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) – compounds used in a number household and industrial applications.

Litten presents a history of the rise and fall of PCB usage in industrial processes, beginning with their arrival to the marketplace in 1929. He considers this history through various social movements of the 20th century, including worker safety, environmentalism and a growing awareness of chemical toxicity.

The study includes a graphic timeline of the Upper Hudson Remedial Superfund, from the state's decision to close of the region to all fishing in 1976, to the federal Environmental Protection Agency's April 11, 2019, certification that the General Electric Company's mandated \$1.7 billion dredging and PCB removal effort was complete, pending further testing.

New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo and Attorney General Letitia James have disputed the federal EPA's decision to certify the project was completed. In April, both Cuomo and James stated that their offices are preparing to sue the EPA over its decision.

Litten's narration of the history of PCBs in upstate New York, and the ongoing struggle to balance human health, ecological well-being, business needs and public expectations, serves as a classic case study of the social, economic and political challenges of dealing with toxic materials in our shared environment.

"When it comes to toxic pollution of our waters, this experience and others tell us that we need to worry far more about what we don't know about chemicals and their effects—and find a way to do something about it before, not after, crises develop," Litten writes. "The alternative is endless repetition of our region's tortuous experience with GE's cleanup of PCBs from the Hudson. This is a matter on which all should be able to agree: prevention would be far better and far cheaper than cleanup."