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★ *Georgia on G.E.'s mind*

PCB mess on the Coosa River -- Sound familiar?

Any wonder that Sam Nunn is on G.E.'s board?

by William H. Brooks
Cumming, Georgia
Updated: Thursday, March 22, 2001

Thought y'all should know that G.E. has left **Rome, Georgia** and the local **Coosa River** basin wrecked as well.

Just call me a distressed North Georgia native. I lived by **General Electric Company's** poisoned **Rome** plant for a time while finishing college. Now, after years of seeing relatively nothing done about the local contamination, I am moved to action.

Sharing information and the same corporate adversaries

The rural South rarely gets much national media attention, but I prepared this article after reading in *The New York Times* a recent series by Kirk Johnson chronicling G.E.'s PCB contamination of the Hudson River. The sharing of information can only be beneficial and good for all, especially in these matters of mutual interest wherein we all face the same corporate adversaries.

The health effects on people in this region appear quite serious, particularly when you read in the local press about high rates of Cancer, and about the physical and mental impairments plaguing

children in the area's schools. My work carries me to these local cities and towns. This G.E. and Monsanto inspired contamination foisted upon the city of Rome and the Coosa River basin is unfortunately as timely, and dangerous, as the situation facing upstate New York communities and the Hudson River valley.

It is hoped that New York residents will find all the following information to be worthy and valuable in your own dealings with G.E. and with PCB contamination.

► **To read:** '*How We Got Here -- The History of Chlorinated Diphenyl (PCB's)*', [Click Here!](#)

G.E.'s Rome plant contaminated with PCB's

Twenty-five years ago while attending Berry College, I was a resident of Rome, a city located in Georgia's northwest corner. It was there that I was taking an Organic Chemistry course. I was actually sitting in class one afternoon when the professor announced that PCB's had just been outlawed by the U.S. Congress. Within months, the PCB contamination at G.E.'s Rome plant, a block away from my duplex, was made public.

Coosa River basin contaminated; waters flow to Gulf of Mexico

During that same period, G.E. also admitted to contaminating the Coosa River basin, the area in which Rome is situated, and through which the river flows westward into **Alabama** and then southerly as it becomes the **Alabama River**. The Alabama empties ultimately into **Mobile Bay** and the **Gulf of Mexico**. Though I do not live in Rome today, I have followed the peer reviewed science of these chemicals ever since, and also watched developments concerning the contamination because it affects the whole region. That these situations are essentially the same now as then, amazes me.

Georgia's former Senator Sam Nunn on G.E.'s board

Only from *HudsonWatch.net* did I recently learn that our former US Senator **Sam Nunn** is a G.E. board member! For me, that explains why there has been so little action by the **State of Georgia** in these matters. Our state's **Environmental Protection Division (EPD)** will not even maintain PCB warning signs about the contaminated fish. Mr. Nunn served as the longtime chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and G.E. has a very strong presence in *The Peach State*, having recently moved yet another of its divisions to the Atlanta area.

► To contact Sen. Sam Nunn, [Click Here!](#)

G.E. plants in Rome, GA and upstate NY share similarities

With many similarities to the Hudson River and to the two contaminated G.E. plant sites in upstate New York, the Rome situation

differs only in that transformers (Medium transformers, two to a railcar, holding hundreds of gallons of oil each) were manufactured here from about 1953 till approximately last year. Until 1977, the oil mix used to insulate and cool them included both *Pyranol* and chlorobenzenes.

Dioxins form when transformers burn

It is well documented in the chemistry literature that chlorobenzenes and PCB's *will* create dioxins when transformers overheat or 'burn'. When G.E. energized and maximum load-tested its assembled transformers, those that 'failed' did so by 'burning' -- electrically arcing inside.

Copper acts as a catalyst

It is also well documented in the chemistry literature that copper, in the presence of these chemicals, serves as a catalyst in the production of dioxins when transformers arc, or when 'fires' occur from overloading, lightning strikes, etc.. Sure enough, dioxins are found here in Rome, but not much testing has occurred, and G.E. has not being forthright in telling just how much their recent '6 tests' inside the plant have shown.

Lax enforcement by Georgia environmental officials

Georgia's EPD, like its brethren 'enviro' agencies in the neighboring southern states, is notorious for lax enforcement. When the PCB contamination was first made public, EPD did not even post fish advisories. EPD still does not post many signs today nor maintain the ones they have. Those that get torn down are rarely replaced, even though the fish are heavily contaminated and serve as one of the routes of exposure for people away from direct contamination.

(A few miles downriver, and to the west of Rome, just across the Alabama line, **Lake Weiss** still hosts state-licensed commercial fishing, sending tainted fish -- especially catfish (a bottom feeder) -- to tables all over the region.)

PCB contamination upriver from Rome

Noteworthy is that EPD has a fish advisory on its Web site. It recommends limited fish consumption even from fishing areas miles *upriver* from Rome, due to the presence of PCB's. The upriver contamination is probably due to the fact that the blackened oil from failed transformers was often given to workers to take home to exterminate termites, treat fence posts, use to knock down dust on the backroads, etc..

Contaminated sludge used as fertilizer

In the mid-1960's, G.E.'s plant tied in to Rome's sewer system. G.E.'s

illegal discharges of oils into the system concentrated in sewage sludge, and until the 1970's that sludge was given to farmers to use as a fertilizer -- again widely dispersed, and put right on local and regional tables in beef, dairy products, vegetables, etc..

PCB's in Rome's drinking water; dioxin a concern

The dioxin component of these spread contaminants makes this especially threatening to people's health. Limited testing has shown alarmingly high levels of PCB's in Rome's drinking water -- the city's water intake is located just below the outfall of the natural basin in which the G.E. plant is situated. The results of testing for dioxin, finally conducted last year, have yet to be made public.

Rome -- politically a 'captive' of G.E.'s 3300 jobs

The public health side of this issue cries out for attention here in the largely-unregulated South. On the business side, you will find that the City of Rome has always been captive to the 3300 jobs G.E. provided. Now though, the city and **Floyd County** are image conscious, even to the point of not allowing fish advisory signs in the city park where the two rivers downtown form the Coosa, and where locals still fish -- below the plant outfall.

Floyd County also is concerned that G.E.'s plan for the site is just to cap it and leave it, effectively rendering the largest developed industrial parcel in the county forever empty -- a permanent 'brownfield'.

The county operates the old 'Lock and Dam', below Rome, as a public fishing site and boat launch on the Coosa. The lock has been inoperable since the days of the cotton barges, and the fish warning signs were torn down long ago. This section is believed to contain some of the most heavily contaminated sediments in the river. However, the bustle of activity around a place called *Mayo's Bar* is such that the county has plans to restore the lock to allow boat traffic and fishermen from Lake Weiss to have easier access to downtown Rome. The plan is dependent upon G.E. paying for cost overruns resulting from clean up of the PCB contamination, its containment and disposal.

Floyd County badly contaminated

Chemical pollution around other parts of Floyd County is apparently so bad, that according to a recent state and federal profile of polluted creeks and tributaries, 22 of the 23 area creeks are contaminated with PCB's. Fishing in them is cautioned against (if you can find the warning signs to heed).

G.E. does not want to pay to clean up its mess

G.E.'s contentiousness in dealing with the PCB contamination in Rome and the Coosa River basin has gotten a lot of ink in the local press. For example:

1. ['Dioxin found in G.E. landfill'](#) -- G.E.'s testing finds dioxins at its Rome plant's landfill. The Company only releases data showing the 'minimum' levels of contamination measured.
2. ['G.E. draws the line'](#) -- G.E. says it will not clean up its plant site, the largest industrial site in the county, and located in the heart of Rome.
3. ['PCB experts to meet public'](#) -- Medical researchers, affiliated with G.E., address the local concerned populace.
4. ['Emory doctor to answer PCB health questions'](#) -- Medical researcher, *not* affiliated with G.E., addresses the local concerned populace not satisfied with the quality of answers received at earlier meeting with medical researchers affiliated with G.E..
5. ['Corps OK's lock project'](#) -- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issues provisional permit for lock restoration. Plans must provide for PCB containment and disposal. A key element is that G.E. must pay for any cost overruns resulting from clean up of PCB contamination. Viability of the project hinges on G.E.'s participation in dealing with its contaminants.

Monsanto Superfund site in nearby Anniston

Yet another contaminated area close to Rome is in **Anniston, Alabama**, an hour or so southwest, and downriver. Anniston, located in **Calhoun County**, is home to the now-closed **Fort McClellan**, and also home to the nation's newest nerve gas incinerator, under construction at the **US Army's Chemical Weapons Depot**. The incinerator plant starts testing this summer, and the locals are watching as sirens are being installed in the five county area. Municipalities are being asked to plan evacuation routes.

Anniston used to be home to one of the earliest **Swann Chemical Company** plants manufacturing PCB's starting in 1929. Swann, its plants and patents were purchased by **Monsanto Chemical Company** in 1935. The Anniston plant is now owned and operated by **Solutia, Inc.**, a firm created in 1997 when Monsanto spun off its chemical businesses. Monsanto's manufacturing activities and careless production habits left parts of the city a *Superfund* site with US-EPA as the lead agency in charge of cleanup.

Monsanto claims PCB's do no harm

Apparently, US-EPA was invited in by Monsanto when the class action lawsuits started last fall. A few thousand residents have signed-on to join these actions. Monsanto *still* claims that PCB's do no harm.

Though Monsanto claims '*Problem?, What problem?*', the Company recently dug up all the baseball fields at the local park, and put the tainted soil under tarp, promising to have the fields re-sod in time for the Spring season. The contaminated ball fields have been in continuous use by the neighborhood kids for more than 20 years:

['Ballfields to open in March'](#)

Monsanto in court

The failure of the **Alabama Dept. of Environmental Management** (ADEM) to do anything about PCB contamination for the last quarter century has meant a lot of local grief. Monsanto is presently before the Alabama Supreme Court fighting a request by a group of local plaintiffs to do health testing, arguing that 'harm' must first be proven:

['Tainted history'](#)

['Monsanto seeks new trial venue'](#)

['Medical monitoring case heads to top court'](#)

US-EPA does not test people

Also frightening for the residents is the fact that US-EPA's soil testing for PCB's found not only PCB's, but also massive lead contamination.

(Something I recently discovered is that US-EPA and its *Superfund* program are not chartered to test people for chemical contaminants. The Agency does gather data though, like reports of Cancer-clusters and mortality studies, to use as statistical canaries to guide the Agency to possible sources of pollution.)

Blood serum tests for PCB's were conducted on an undisclosed number of persons by the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). The results were publicly released. They showed highly-elevated PCB levels in the sampling. In the case of ten unfortunate individuals in that sampling, dioxins were found at dangerous levels:

['500 citizens and PCB's'](#)

ATSDR did a sampling last August testing blood serum for lead. The full results have yet to be released. The findings may show high levels of lead flowing in local bloodstreams. Also, there was recent testing of soil samples for lead:

['EPA begins more lead sampling'](#)

Highest Cancer rates in Alabama

Calhoun County leads the state in incidence of Cancer. That statistic, and the PCB and lead contaminations, along with the apparent indifference of local officials, have stirred anger amongst many private citizens:

['Activists disrupt PCB meeting'](#)

The Web site of *The Anniston Star*, the local newspaper, has a great deal more material on local contamination, particularly this listing of last year's PCB stories:

['PCB Links'](#)

Called 'a witch hunt'

Anniston's city fathers along with Calhoun County officials seem to side with the local chamber of commerce, which calls the contamination investigations by US-EPA and ATSDR "a witch hunt to squeeze industries":

['EPA researches effects of industry on Anniston'](#)

Oxford mayor still eats the fish

Responses by other area and state officials have been just as reckless. The mayor of nearby **Oxford, Alabama** says he has no problem with PCB's and *still* eats the fish. In 1996, ADEM even denied a request by Alabama's Dept. of Public Health for further testing. More local views and links to more stories:

['PCB's - Where do we stand?'](#)

Recently, Dr. John Peterson Myers, director of the *W. Alton Jones Foundation* in Charlottesville, VA, and co-author of the book, ['Our Stolen Future'](#), was invited to write an op-ed piece in *The Anniston Star*:

['Monsanto's PCB's to be here a long time - The damage spreads beyond our borders'](#)

Also, *The Star* has a detailed article about the history of PCB's in Anniston. Anniston has the dubious honor of being home to an original 1929 Swann Chemical Company PCB production plant:

['The Evolution of Anniston's 72 year PCB history'](#)

Solutia's 'official' history of the former Monsanto Anniston plant can be viewed at:

<http://www.solutia.com/corporate/worldwide/anniston.html>

William H. Brooks heads Brooks Technical Services, a private consulting firm with expertise in energy

management, utilities and controls. His work is not related to the above health, contamination and environmental issues. He holds a B.S. from Berry College, 1977, Rome, Georgia, with a double major in Chemistry and Physics. He resides in Cumming, Georgia. For further information about any of the above, Mr. Brooks may be contacted via E-mail at:
brookstechsvcs@mindspring.com

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