THE SPRINGFIELD UNION
SPRINGFIELD, MASS.
D. 83,063

APR 8 1976

Public Water Given OK by U.S. Agency

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BOSTON — Public drinking water supplies serving Pittsfield and North Adams have been given a clean bill of health by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) following a series of tests for the toxic chemical (PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl).

Paul Keough, EPA's regional public relations director, said Wednesday from his Boston office that analysts found "no significant amounts of PCBs in samples taken from seven reservoirs and several wells providing water to the two Berkshire cities.

All the samples, he said, were judged to be below the detectable level of .05 parts-per-billion.

"There do not appear to be any areas of concern," said Keough, in the EPA review of water supply samples.

The federal agency decided in January to test drinking water in six New England cities for concentrations of PCBs "because of the growing body of evidence that PCBs are more widespread in the environment than we anticipated," Keough said.

EPA testing has revealed some high concentrations of the chemical in fish and sediment taken from the Housatonic River below the General Electric Co. plant in Pittsfield.

GE and several other New England manufacturers use PCBs as a nonflammable liquid insulating agent in electrical transformers and capacitors. Made only in the U.S. by the Monsanto Co. in St. Louis, Mo., PCBs have insulating qualities not duplicated by other materials, according to GE officials.

Keough said Wednesday that EPA Regional Administrator John McGlennon will be in Pittsfield April 16 for a two-hour meeting with General Electric officials. While the conference was scheduled to review GE's entire operation in Pittsfield, Keough said, PCBs will be discussed.

The EPA spokesman said the federal agency is reviewing GE's discharge permit allowing the company to dump minimal amounts of PCBs into the Housatonic River. He noted that the GE plants in Northeast New York State, users of PCBs in the manufacture of capacitors, have been subjected to zero-discharge permits.

Keough said EPA testing will continue in the Housatonic River in Pittsfield, near GE, and the Hoosac River, near the Sprague Electric Co. in North Adams, a capacitor manufacturer and PCB user.

MONS 036694