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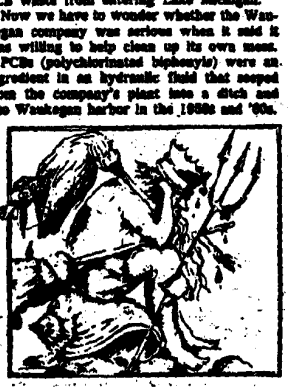
Corporate help needed on PCBs

Our Bad Corporate Citizen Award goes to Outboard Marine Corp. for refusing to pay for an emergency project to keep more of its own PCB waste from entering Lake Michigan.

Now we have to wonder whether the Waukegan company was serious when it said it was willing to help clean up its own mess.

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) were an ingredient in an hydraulic fluid that seeped from the company's plant into a ditch and into Waukegan harbor in the 1950s and '60s.



Company officials say they were shocked to learn in 1976 that the fluid contained PCBs, which are stored in body fat and mother's milk and have caused liver cancer and miscarriages in laboratory animals.

In a series of legal actions that followed, the company told the federal Environmental Protection Agency, in effect, "Tell us how to clean up PCB waste, and we'll try to do it."

The EPA still hasn't figured out how to clean it up, but it did suggest a way to keep the situation from worsening. It asked Outboard Marine to spend up to $400,000 on a culvert to prevent water in the ditch—the nation's most PCB-polluted waterway—from being washed into the lake with rain and melting snow.

The company refused, saying this was "very likely" the EPA's responsibility and the PCB hazard might not be that bad, anyway. So the EPA will build the project and try to recover the cost from the company later.

We hope Outboard Marine will change its attitude and work with the EPA to solve the bigger problem of PCBs already in the lake. The fishermen who buy its major product, the Johnson outboard motor, would like that.

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