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Put it to the voters the voters

PCB Project plans for '83

1407 BY JOHN LYNCH

After three years of battling the federal government, the state, the county, utility companies and chemical manufacturers, just to name a few, Sonoma's PCB Project is considering tossing the issue of highly toxic PCBs into the laps of the voters.

Not that Project founders Chambier Bechtel and Allen Simontacchi haven't been successful in their head-to-head clashes with these powers that be. Never, since that fateful day in January 1980, when a Pacific Gas and Electric Company PCB electrical capacitor blew its top on East Napa street here, has any group at the grass roots end done so much in blowing the minds of industry, government and the public, in challenging and informing them about the dangers of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls).

Now, perhaps, it's time to put it to a vote, they say.

Full circle, then? The end?

Not quite. The PCB capacitor that showered its toxic contaminants along Nathanason Creek here three years ago has made an all too lasting impression. There is still considerable work to be done, they insist.

BECHTEL, mother of one child, and Simontacchi, a Sonoma PG&E lineman, have instigated petition drives and government resolutions, provided information as well as medical and legal referral to PCB "victims," orchestrated lawsuits, demanded stricter enforcement—in short, devoted all of their energies to ultimately banishing the use of PCBs from the face of the earth. Simontacchi even attended last year's hearings in Washington D.C. on establishing the new federal guidelines for use and control of PCBs.

The chemical, used primarily as an insulating agent in electrical equipment such as capacitors, transformers and fluorescent light ballasts, is a

known environmental and human health hazard, and a highly suspected carcinogen.

PCBs is considered to be one of the most omnipresent of all chemicals on the planet, its contaminants routinely turning up in oceans and waterways, fish and other forms of wildlife. Alarming high concentrations of PCBs continue to be detected in the milk of human mothers.

The substance does not breakdown naturally in the environment and instead, tends to bioaccumulate in the food chain. PCBs, when exposed to high temperatures, have been known to manifest even the more dangerous by-products of dibenzofurans and dibenzodioxins (dioxin).

"Although we can sue on behalf of our clients," explained Bechtel, "we are still not accomplishing the pressure of getting PCBs out of the environment."

Simontacchi commented: "PG&E's still playing the same games. The (protective) suits are the same. The (PCB clean-up) training is the same. CAL OSHA still hasn't come up with any (safety) standards."

All told, they maintain, little has changed.

In the true grass roots spirit which has guided them from the very beginning, both believe that the issue should go to the voters.

WHILE it remains to be seen just when that drive to get the PCB issue on the ballot will take place, other efforts are continuing. In outlining their plans for 1983, the Sonoma-based Project hopes to:

- Urge the Board of Supervisors to establish an independent industry council to monitor what toxic materials are being handled and transported in Sonoma County, a consideration in response to last year's formaldehyde spill in the Russian River. "The county was very, very fortunate that it was formaldehyde in the river, which will dissipate. But if it was PCBs...?";

- Initiate a program whereby county hospitals

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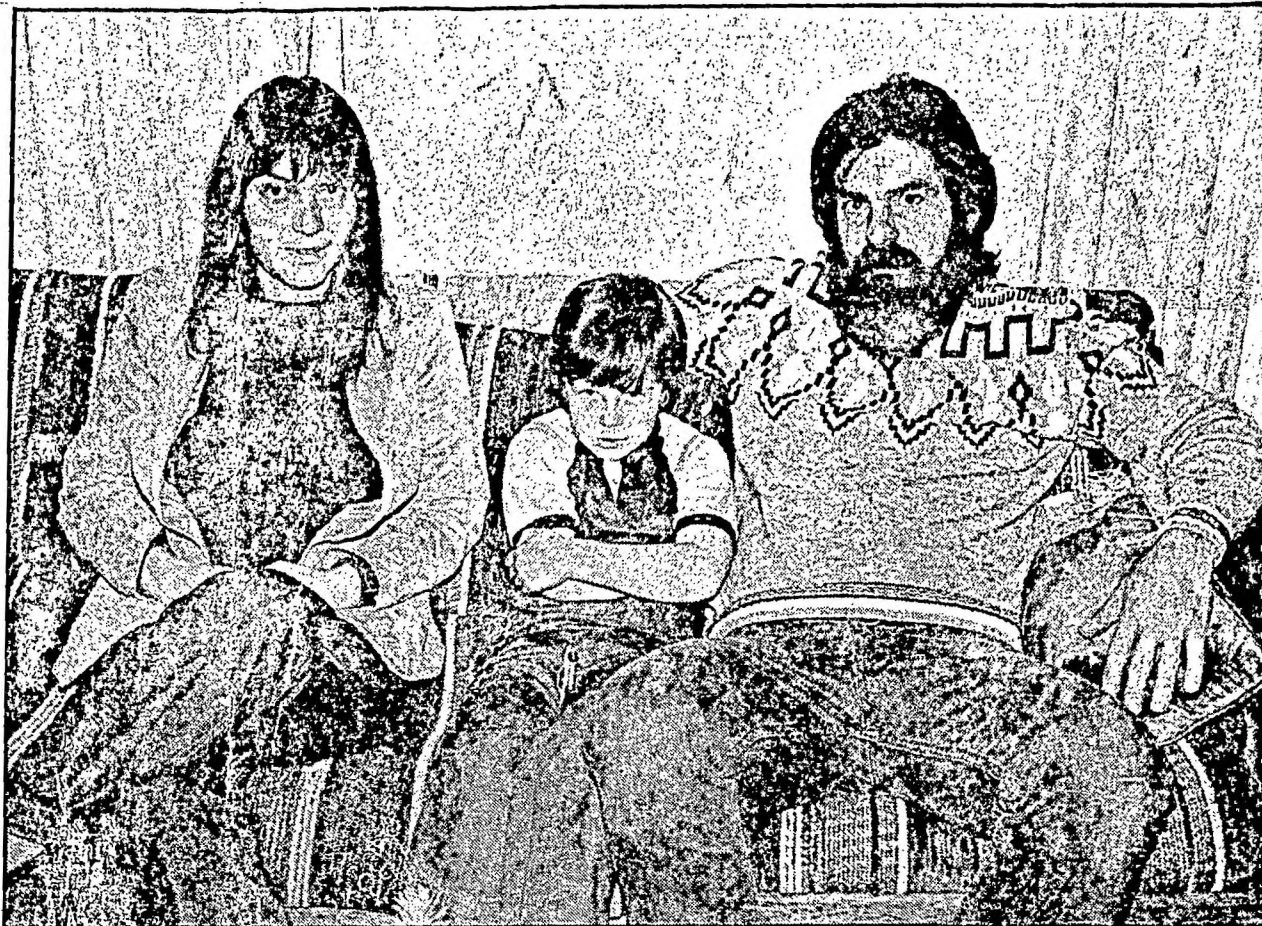


Photo by John Lynch

THE PCB PROJECT PLOWS ON

From left: Chambier Bechtel and son, Jamie; Allen Simontacchi

would have one room for decontamination for all toxic exposures;

- Serve all filed lawsuits;
- Do more field work out of state.

ONE OF the Project's biggest accomplishments over the past year was the organization of its world science files, the beefing up of its legal and medical teams, and the establishment of the PCB Project

board of directors. Directors include: Cissy Brooke, Sonoma County resident active in pro-choice campaigns; Patty DeJoy, a valley resident involved in local trails and bikeways planning; physician Neil Erlich; attorney Allan Kanner, who served as legal counsel in the Three-Mile Island nuclear power plant incident; and biologist David Gonzales.

Members of the PCB Medical Team are: Sebastopol internist Dr. Steven Hubbard; Erlich; Berkeley physician Les Hilger; and U.C. Berkeley's head of optometry, Dr. Frank Zisman.

The PCB Legal Team is comprised of attorneys Kanner; Philip Knudsen of Oakland; Alan Lurch of San Francisco; Bob Pickus; and Mary Gerber. Expected to join the team soon is Martin Gritzer, "the original asbestos lawyer," according to Bechtel.

Despite such well-oiled ammunition, Bechtel admits that "the burden of proof will always be on us." But she remains convinced that not only will PCBs' omnipresence in the environment be underscored time and time again, the "cozy" relationship and lack of enforcement that has evolved among government, utility and industry will also be further brought to light.

"We will reveal beyond a shadow of a doubt that we're right," she stated firmly.

The battle continues.