This week

The polluter pays—$4 million

General Electric (US) has agreed to pay $3 million toward the cost of cleaning the Hudson River of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) which it was largely responsible for dumping there. In February General Electric (GE) was found guilty of breaking New York State's environmental conservation laws. Although the payment of $3 million is not officially a fine for this offence, US environmentalists are likely to regard it as a precedent for the "polluter pays" principle.

Last autumn PCB levels in fish taken from the Hudson were found to be so much higher than the government safety limit (five parts per million) that State Environmental Commissioner Ogden R. Reid banned commercial fishing in the river and warned that its fish, particularly bass and salmon, were not to be eaten. In September he announced a total ban on the discharge of PCBs into the Hudson from two GE factories making capacitors, to take effect a year later.

GE had previously been licensed by the state to discharge up to 30 lbs of PCBs a day into the river. After claiming that it could not reduce these discharges below 3.5 oz/day by 1977, the company has now agreed to stop dumping PCBs by July 1977, at an internal cost of some 5 million. (A proposed government standard would, in any case, limit to zero PCB discharges into water courses from manufacturing industry.) GE was not found guilty of breaking the terms of its licence to discharge PCBs, but of creating pollution that exceeded state standards for drinking and process water extracted from the Hudson. In hindsight, the state's licence was questionable at least. Because of this element of "joint culpability", the $3 million payment (plus a $1 million donation to research on the problem) will be matched by the state.

It is not clear exactly how the Hudson will be rehabilitated. One proposal is to dredge 1·5 million cu.m of PCB-laden sediment from the river and incinerate at high temperature.

GE has also admitted that 65 of the workers at one of its Hudson River plants developed illnesses ranging from allergic dermatitis to nausea, dizziness, eye and nose irritation, and asthmatic bronchitis possibly as a result of exposure to PCB vapours. In June it did not contest charges carrying total fines of $1300 of violating safety at work standards for PCB vapours.

The New York State actions have not been without repercussions—both local and national. Locally, Ogden Reid resigned "under pressure" after clashing with the state governor who opposed the ban on PCB discharges on economic [illegible]. Nationally, the affair has been [illegible] evaluation of the rent in forcing a re[illegible] other states. PCBs have rendered fish [illegible] dible and have found their way into the milk of cows and women. Recent animal experiments showing PCBs to be toxic at low concentrations, and potentially carcinogenic, have added to the pressure. But the New York contamination, which some believe to have threatened a $175-million programme to restock the Hudson and Great Lakes with trout and salmon, have been traumatic (and well-reported in the *New York Times*).

So great has been the pressure that the writing is now on the wall for PCBs. Monsanto, sole US (and British) manufacturer of PCBs, announced in January that it would phase out its US production. In August, the Environmental Protection Agency, following pledges of all out war on PCBs, proposed stringent standards for discharges into water courses. Perhaps most significantly, in the same month the House of Representatives passed an amendment to the Toxic Substances Bill demanding a total ban on PCBs within three years. The Bill is not yet law, but it is inevitable that PCBs will soon be nothing more than a bad memory in the US—or would be if not for their persistence in the environment, and the unsolved problems raised by disposing of millions of PCB-containing components.

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Environnement : société américaine condamnée !

La compagnie de produits chimiques Allied Chemical a été condamnée mardi par un juge fédéral de Richmond, en Virginie, à payer une amende de 13,2 millions de dollars pour avoir pendant des années, déversé des produits dangereux dans les rivières de l'Etat. La compagnie était en particulier accusée d'avoir pollué la rivière St. James avec du Kepone, produit toxique utilisé dans la fabrication d'insecticides. Le juge a expliqué sa décision en déclarant que la pollution est «un crime contre tous les citoyens».

D'autre part, la société Monsanto Industrial Co. a annoncé qu'elle cesserait complètement de fabriquer d'ici à la fin de l'année prochaine un autre produit dangereux, le PCB (Diphényle polychlorure). Monsanto est la seule compagnie américaine à fabriquer le PCB, l'une des principales sources de pollution de la rivière Hudson, qui parcourt l'Etat de New York. Le PCB est un fluide utilisé notamment comme isolant dans les transformateurs électriques. — (afp)

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