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Edison PCBs tied to river fouling

By Bruce Ingersoll

Poisonous PCBs have been leaking out of electrical equipment at Commonwealth Edison Co.'s storage yard in west suburban Maywood, polluting the Des Plaines River, according to state officials.

One area in the yard was found to be saturated with PCB levels as high as 22,040 parts per million, state Environmental Protection Agency records show.

Whenever it rains, runoff washes PCBs — short for polychlorinated biphenyls — into two storm sewers that empty into the nearby river, EPA officials said Tuesday.

They have detected an accumulation of PCBs in the river bottom downstream from the sewers.

"From what I know, this is the second most significant source of PCB pollution in northeastern Illinois," said Larry Ziemba, an EPA engineer.

THE BIGGEST SOURCE is the Outboard Marine Corp. plant in Waukegan. Its discharges have turned Waukegan Harbor into the most PCB-polluted waterway on the Great Lakes.

For approximately 30 years, Edison has been storing PCB-filled transformers and capacitors in the yard at its Maywood Technical Center, north of the Eisenhower Expressway near the 1st Av. exit.

In handling the ultraheavy equipment, Edison workers have spilled unknown amounts of PCB fluid, Ziemba said. But it appears that leaking capacitors have caused most of the contamination.

For EPA officials, this pollution has always been right under their noses. From their 12th-floor offices at 1701 S. 1st Av. in Maywood, they can peer directly down on the rows of bulky transformers.

It was on Feb. 10, 1976, that Michael Schmitt, an EPA engineer, decided to sample the stormwater pouring into the Des Plaines.

"I HAD A HUNCH," he said. "I knew I'd find PCBs. Lo and behold, I did."

On Dec. 20, 1976, the EPA notified Edison of "apparent violations."

Since then, the agency has taken no enforcement action against Edison, opting for voluntary compliance.

The company has "tightened up" its handling of PCB-filled equipment and its storage of PCB fluids, said John Hughes. Edison's director of water-pollution control.

Punctured capacitors, for example, are stored in leakproof containers until they can be shipped to a chemical-waste dump at Sheffield, Ill., he said.

PCB-filled transformers and capacitors have the advantage of being flame-resistant. However, domestic production of PCBs has been curtailed in view of scientific findings that PCBs cause cancer and induce miscarriages in laboratory animals.

EDISON AND OTHER utilities are phasing out their PCB-filled equipment, Hughes said.

In the meantime, residual PCBs keep washing into the river after downpours. The state EPA and Edison are negotiating the terms of a discharge permit for the Maywood facility. The permit would set PCB-discharge limits and specify what Edison must do to comply.

It is conceivable, EPA officials said, that Edison may have to seal up its drainage system and build a new one.

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