Hayward, CA
(Alameda Co.)
Review
(D. 44,335)
(S. 44,434)

AUG 11 1983

Allen's P. C. B Est. 1888

GE plant sued over baby's death

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OAKLAND — A Fremont mother who says she worked "elbow-deep" in toxic PCB has filed suit against General Electric for the wrongful death of her son Steven, who died four days after he was born.

Christine Larson's suit is the latest filed by former employees who contend exposure to PCB at the now-closed General Electric plant here caused serious health problems.

It could take as long as eight years to finish flushing PCB from the 24-acre East 14th Street facility, which was closed in 1975 after contamination was determined, said Ron Condit, an environmental specialist with the state health department.

But the cleanup is of little help to Mrs. Larson, who claims that working in the oily substance also caused her to have a miscarriage this year.

Her suit was filed in Alameda County Superior Court July 28 against General Electric and the Monsanto Co., which manufactured polychlorinated biphenyls until they were outlawed in 1977 after being identified as a suspected cause of cancer and birth defects.

Mrs. Larson and her husband, Wayne, are asking for an unspecified amount of damages for the death of Steven, who died from congenital heart and lung complications on July 25, 1982.

Although she left General Electric nearly eight years ago, Mrs. Larson blames her work with the chemicals as the cause of her problems.

Mrs. Larson began working in the plant's maintenance yard in 1970 where telephone transformers containing PCB were routinely sent for repair. To fix the equipment, her lawsuit states, Mrs. Larson was forced to reach inside the machinery, leaving her arms covered with the chemicals. She says she had nothing more than a rag to remove the mess.

Mrs. Larson left the plant when it closed and six years later made a frightening discovery.

She said she heard about dangers connected with PCB from news articles and from a lawsuit filed in August 1981 on behalf of two other workers at the plant.

The 1981 suit sought $120 million in damages on behalf of George Brown of San Ramon and Juan Esquibel of Oakland, who maintained their medical problems stemmed from years of daily exposure to PCB.

Brown and his wife, Vicki, had a daughter on March 31, 1975 who was born with a cleft lip and palate, defects the Browns attributed to his exposure to PCB.

Guy Kornblum, the San Francisco attorney who filed the suit, said the case is still pending.

"There has been a lack of hard medical evidence that would survive trial court scrutiny," Kornblum said of the delay in getting the 1981 lawsuit to court. "We have not found medical people with sufficient research to say that the substance of PCBs are causing dermatological, neurological and genetic problems."

But Chambier Bechtel, director of the non-profit National PCB Project in Sonoma, disagreed and said there is overwhelming evidence of the material's danger to unborn children.

Ms. Bechtel said she was particularly concerned with Mrs. Larson's case because Mrs. Larson "was completely healthy until she was literally bathed in PCBs."

Betty Mohr, an administrative worker at General Electric, said Wednesday that the company would not comment until it sees Mrs. Larson's complaint.

"But we point out that state and federal agency studies have shown no adverse long-term health effects of PCB exposure," she said.

In the meantime, under a 1980 order from the state health department, General Electric is continuing to extract PCB-contaminated groundwater from the plant. The oils are being removed and sent to a hazardous waste disposal site outside California, Condit said.

"It's a very slow process," he explained. "But the PCBs are being contained."

PCB-ARCH-EXT0376161