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Chemical Ban Poses Conflict Possibility

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John Brogan may or may not disqualify himself from any decision by the State Natural Resource Board on banning polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

He may — if he considers his ownership of 2,000 shares of Ft. Howard Paper Co. stock a conflict of interest.

He may not — if he decides there is no conflict with his involvement with the paper company, which the Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR) has pinpointed as a major source of PCBs being discharged into the Fox River.

The issue came up Thursday after Brogan, a newly appointed board member from Green Bay attending his first meeting, asked for more information and a delay in any action on banning PCBs.

PCBs are industrial compounds used in many ways, ranging from coolant-insulation for transformers to protective coatings for wood, metal, adhesives, and carbonless reproducing paper.

In concentrated dosages, some scientists have suggested that PCBs could be harmful to humans. Some links to cancer also have been suggested, but none has been proved.

On Wednesday, Thomas Fox of Washburn, the chairman of the board's Environmental Quality Committee, suggested the DNR impose rules banning the use and disposal of PCBs.



JOHN BROGAN

Fox was noticeably upset about the DNR's lack of action in this area and its inability to produce enough information about the use and effect of PCBs.

In a survey last year by the DNR, Ft. Howard's paper recycling plant was the second largest discharger of PCBs into the Fox River. Another Ft. Howard plant ranked third.

DNR officials have asked the paper companies to track down the source of the PCBs used there, but have gotten no reply. But they are believed to be coming from the Xerox-type paper Ft. Howard uses in its recycling process.

In his confirmation hearing before the State Senate, Brogan had promised to abstain from voting on any issue that presented a conflict of interest over Ft. Howard. Oliver Williams, acting DNR administrator for environmental standards, told Fox' committee Thursday that banning PCBs "very clearly means you don't recycle paper. You'd have to use virgin pulp," Williams said during the discussion.

If true, that apparently would have a substantial detrimental effect on Ft. Howard's recycling operations.

In an interview Thursday afternoon, Brogan offered two explanations for his request for a delay and his relation to Ft. Howard.

The delay, he said, was sought because he had to "plead enormous ignorance" about PCBs, "what they are, what they cause, and why they're bad."

Another reason for his not disqualifying himself now was his own view of his relation to the company, he said. With apparent bemusement, he recounted for reporters his role in forcing Ft. Howard to become a publicly-owned company as opposed to the family-held operation it primarily was for years.

For some time, he was the only stock broker that would find a buyer for the stock that shareholders who wanted to sell — but not at the low prices being offered by the family that owned the biggest share of stock, he said.

That effort earned him a reputation in Green Bay, he said, of not being a friend of Ft. Howard, even though he owns about $40,000 worth of the stock himself now. At one point, he said the company even sought to have him investigated, but he was absolved of any wrongdoing.

Partly for that reason, he said he "doesn't see what the problem is" of his acting on rules that may ban PCBs and hurt Ft. Howard.

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