Fish in Hoosac tested for PCB

By MICHAEL W. MUNLEY

NORTH ADAMS — The Environmental Protection Agency will soon report whether fish in the Hoosac River contain PCB, a toxic chemical used by Sprague Electric Co.

The federal agency will resume its report this week or next, says Edward Fitzpatrick, who directed the agency's test in September of fish, water and sediment in the Hoosac and Housatonic rivers.

Water tests showed "relatively low levels" of the chemical coming from Sprague, Mr. Fitzpatrick said today. However, John G. McGleanon, regional director of the agency, expressed concern over "high levels" of PCB in the sediment of the Housatonic in Pittsfield.

"We are not doing anything illegal," said Robert J. Diodati, manager of industrial relations at Sprague which uses the chemical polychlorinated-biphenyl, to insulate most of the capacitors it makes.

"We have a report from EPA that shows negligible amounts, minor traces really. We haven't been told anything really. We will continue our precautions," said Mr. Diodati. They call for all Sprague waste residue to be burned by ChemTrol Pollution Services of Model City, N.Y., he said.

Although the tests showed 57 parts of PCB per million parts of water at a Sprague drain leading to the river, the chemical builds up intensely in fish exposed to it and the Food and Drug Administration has banned sales of fish with more than five parts of PCB per million.

The tests of the Housatonic in August and the Hoosac a month later are part of the agency's effort "to establish factually the magnitude of PCB discharges to New England, Mr. Fitzpatrick said. His agency is close to setting new standards for PCB in water, he said.

The chemical has been known to be toxic to fish and workers exposed to it. Three years ago, Monsanto Chemical Co. of St. Louis, Mo., the only U.S. manufacturer of the chemical, stopped selling it to all but electrical companies that could limit its use to "closed systems."

The phrase means the chemical is closed off from exposure to humans, said Mr. Diodati. He explained that PCB comes to Sprague as a liquid in large tanks and is "impregnated" into sealed capacitors by an automatic process.

The only way PCB could show up in a stream between Sprague and the Hoosac River, he said, is by clinging to molecules of water during the impregnation, and being lost through small quantities of waste water.

Solid waste, he said, and hard residue from liquid waste is gathered twice a year into about 80 barrels and burned by the New York firm at its headquarters in Model City. Residue from that process is sealed in containers and buried at a landfill there, he said.

Aside from its fact-finding mission in the one-day river tests, the federal agency is also negotiating with Sprague to arrive at terms of a permit for the company's discharge into the Hoosac River. So far, the company has had no permit to discharge PCB, said Mr. Fitzpatrick.

PCB is part of the permit already granted by the federal agency to General Electric Co., the other known user of the chemical in Berkshire County. But the company today denied any relationship between its "tiny quantities" of PCB discharge and the high amounts found in river sediment downstream in the Housatonic.

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Fish in Hoosac being tested

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The settled PCB may result from the years before 1972 when PCB was widely used in industry for a range of products from paper, plastics, ceramics, and varnishes to specialized items such as carbonless carbon paper and hydraulic fluids.

GE maintains that this wide exposure of PCB into the general environment, and not the current discharge, has caused the buildup in the Housatonic. Its daily discharges are well within the levels allowed in the permit from the environmental agency, the company said today.

Results of fish tests are harder to derive than findings in water and sediment, Mr. Fitzpatrick said in explaining the delay in publishing those results. Rather than judging the entire fish, he said, the agency will test each part of the fish people usually eat.

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