THE NEW YORK TIMES
MONDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1975

Action on PCB's...

In a startling repudiation of its own expert witness, the General Electric Company has in effect accepted the contention of New York State officials that the company's discharge of toxic chemicals has been heavy enough to poison the fish of the Hudson River. The volume of PCB's (polychlorinated biphenyls) that it has been allowing to wash into the river has affected fish in far greater measure than the United States Food and Drug Administration has up to now regarded as tolerable for human health.

Ogden R. Reid, Commissioner of Environmental Conservation, has thus been vindicated in his demand that General Electric get down to zero discharge of PCB's by the end of next September. Where this chemical compound—used mostly in the manufacture of electrical equipment—has not been directly connected with liver cancer or with damage to the reproductive process (as it has in Japan), it has still caused nausea, eye and nasal irritation and bronchial disturbances in people exposed to it. Though G.E. may have to close its offending plants if it fails to meet the deadline, the electrical workers' union has strongly backed Mr. Reid's action.

The commissioner is also endeavoring to compel the company to begin the enormous task of removing these toxic chemicals from the river bed, where they will otherwise be ingested by bottom fish for decades after the discharge has stopped. A formidable difficulty is that dredging could make matters worse by reinjecting the insoluble PCB's into the running water.

. . . 'Get on With It'

The course taken by Commissioner Reid is gratifying, but the problem of PCB's cannot be solved by the actions of any one state. The Hudson may be worse than any other body of water in the country in this respect, but it is far from being the only grave example. Carp taken from the Mississippi have been buried by order of the Food and Drug Administration. Excessive amounts of the chemical have also been found in fish in the Ohio River, in the oysters of a Florida bay, in the Great Lakes, the Housatonic and many other American waters. According to Russell E. Train, head of the Federal Environmental Protection Agency, PCB's are suspected of having contaminated the drinking water of several communities in Illinois, Indiana, California and Massachusetts.

Yet on this front the E.P.A. has been slow to act. There are indications only now that the agency intends to set effluent standards for PCB's. It has trusted far too long that Congress would deal with the problem by passing a Toxic Substances Act. That bill has been in the making since 1971, repeatedly defeated by the pressure of industrial lobbies.

Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nathaniel P. Reed very properly raises the question of whether there is any sense in the Federal Government's spending millions of dollars to establish fisheries which are soon rendered "malignant" by an indefensible industrial procedure. To those Government agencies that have the responsibility of curbing it, he rightly says "get on with it."

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