'Not opposed,' says Windover

Sprague prefers PCB ban

By PATRICIA S. PERKINS

NORTH ADAMS — Sprague Electric Co. would rather see an outright ban on toxic PCBs than cut down on the amount allowed to leak into the Hoosac River.

Fred A. Windover, corporate counsel for Sprague, said today he is "not opposed" to a new federal law being considered by Congress that would outlaw the manufacture and use of PCBs within a year.

But he made clear Sprague will fight a federal water pollution permit that gives the company a year to reduce its river dumping of PCBs from 3.4 ounches a day to .6 ounces a day.

Sprague is one of 36 companies in the U.S. today that use polychlorinated biphenyls in making electrical systems. Within a 20 mile radius of North Adams, three companies use PCBs — Sprague, General Electric Co. in Pittsfield and JARD Corp. in Bennington, Vt.

Of those, General Electric leaks about 4 ounces of PCBs into the Housatonic River daily, mostly from what is called non-process sources. Most of GE's discharge comes from past dumping in the soil and from PCB buildup in pipes. JARD Corp. does not dump PCBs into any river.

Tomorrow, Sprague and other capacitor manufacturers from Massachusetts will ask Gov. Michael S. Dukakis to go to bat for them in their fight against the limits set in their water pollution permits.

Sprague officials say they have developed a substitute for PCB called Eccol, which the company has been selling for six years. The main problem with it is that capacitors made with it are about 30 per cent more expensive and a little bigger than those made with PCBs.

Companies that buy capacitors prefer the cheaper, smaller PCB models, Sprague officials say. An outright ban on PCB products would force the manufacturers of electrical equipment to spend the extra money on the substitutes available.

Without a ban, which is under consideration in the House of Representatives now, with a good chance of passing this year, Sprague is regulated by the EPA's permit system for water pollution control. In effect, EPA wants Sprague to install a filtering device to catch the PCBs before they end up in the river. According to Sprague officials, the device will cost at least $195,000.

It boils down to a squabbale over timetables. EPA, because of the indisputable health and environmental hazards of PCB, has pledged itself to eliminating the chemical as quickly as possible.

Mousanto Industrial Chemical Co., the sole U.S. manufacturer of PCB, limited in 1973 the sale of the substance to companies making closed electrical systems. It has agreed to stop making PCB altogether in 1977.

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Sprague prefers PCB ban to cutback

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Sprague wants to know why it must install a filtering system at a cost of nearly $200,000 when its customers must start buying substitutes the next year anyway. An outright ban makes more sense, Sprague officials say.

Compared to other companies, the experts say, Sprague dumps very little into the river. Other companies discharge as much as 10 pounds a day into other rivers.

Just what effect Sprague's discharge has on fish and wildlife in the area, no one knows. State fish and wildlife department officials said no studies have been made to test the PCB levels in Hoosac River fish, though there may be some fish caught for testing this summer.

"The fishermen aren't too worried about PCBs here. They don't eat the fish anyway. But when the treatment plants go in, there may be something to worry about," said Adolph Les of Trout Unlimited.

EPA has taken samples of the river above and below the Sprague plant, as well as river bottom samples and tests on the sludge at the North Adams wastewater treatment plant. Results have not yet come in.

Sprague has been using PCBs since 1956, though it has been on the market since 1929. The company uses about a half a million pounds a year.

Most of the waste is collected and trucked to Pittsfield's General Electric plant, where it is incinerated at extremely high temperatures. Incineration, says EPA, completely destroys PCB.

Before 1966, it was assumed that PCB was being used primarily in closed systems. Then, the substance was found in fish in the Baltic Sea, and in birds having reproductive difficulty in Sweden.

Since then, scientists have been astounded at its ubiquitousness. It has been discovered in the Yukon River in Alaska, far from any manufacturing plant, in every major river in the continental U.S., in some drinking water supplies, even in mothers' milk.

Like DDT, PCB builds up in animals. When an animal eats a PCB contaminated fish, it stores all the PCB in its own tissues. As the substance builds up, ill effects begin to show up.

Studies on laboratory animals in the 1930s showed PCB was harmful, but researchers were not aware just how letahl until 1,200 people in Japan contracted a disease called yusho from eating PCB contaminated rice oil.

The Japanese with yusho have had stillbirths, undersized infants, bone and joint deformities and neurological disorders. Twenty-two of the yusho victims have died. A study of the causes of death indicates a higher than expected number of cancer deaths, as well as deaths caused by liver disorders.

Japan has sinced banned all manufacture and use of PCB. Instead, it makes capacitors with a silicone oil. Also, say Sprague officials, the Japanese buy capacitors containing Sprague's substitute.

Medical researchers at the University of Wisconsin studied the effects of PCB on monkeys, reasoning they are closer to humans than other laboratory animals. Very low levels of PCBs caused facial swelling, loss of hair, acne, birth defects, miscarriages, still births and death.

Laboratory studies have been done on mice, rats, chickens, mink, fish of many kinds and dogs. Toxic effects such as undersized infants, reproductive failure, stomach, liver, and lymphatic disorders have been documented.

Although workers at some capacitor plants have complained of acne, eye and nasal irritation, dizziness, nausea, and bronchitis, Sprague officials say they have had no health problems.

The state Occupational Safety and Hygiene Dept. agrees. Inspectors from the state occupational safety agency toured Sprague and General Electric last month as part of the PCB alert. They found both companies are handling the substance safely.

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