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OMC after funds to clean harbor



Joe Manning comments

Who pays for pollution?

It appears that what Outboard Marine Corp. is attempting to do with its "unprecedented" suit against the environmental protection agencies of Illinois and the United States is to get federal money to help clean up Waukegan harbor pollution.

While it is difficult to prove motives, OMC chief counsel Hugh Thomas told The News-Sun the company might consider applying for federal funds to help rid PCB pollution from the harbor bottom.

It could cost $5 million to remove the estimated 160,000 pounds of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) from the harbor silt.

OMC said its suit against the environment agencies seeks to force them to tell OMC what it is supposed to do about the cancer-causing pollution problem.

OMC president Charles Strang said the company doesn't know the first thing about cleaning up pollution. He's undoubtably right. OMC makes equipment for leisure time, not pollution eradication.

But the Illinois EPA said it doesn't tell anyone what to do about cleaning up the pollution messes they made themselves. That's up to the polluters. They come up with a plan, have it approved by the EPA, and proceed.

But an interesting question bloats to the surface: Who is supposed to pay for pollution eradication, the taxpayers or the polluting industry?

OMC seems to feel the taxpayers should share in the cost of the clean-up. OMC admits it did the polluting over about a 30-year period when PCBs seeped into the harbor through a sewer from a die-casting building.

But OMC is also aware of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972. And Strang said, "The provisions (of the act) direct the agencies to develop programs for removal of substances, if that is warranted, and provides funds for studies and the removal. In fact, Congress authorized approximately $300 million to be spent on just such programs."

It also seems logical that if the environmental agencies were to tell a polluter what to do about cleaning up an environmental mess, the EPAs might be asked to chip in with some money.

"After all," a polluting industry can say, "This is your idea."

One cannot blame OMC for trying to get out of footing the bill for harbor clean-up. It's only good business to try to get some help. And OMC certainly seems angling for some federal dough by what the corporation wrote in the suit filed last week.

One of the points raised in the suit says: "The intent of Congress in adopting the Federal Water Pollution Control Act was that the federal and state government would assume the responsibilities for cleaning up the effect of discharges which occured prior to the adoption of the act."

It's true that OMC's harbor pollution took place before 1972; actually from the early 1940s to 1971 when OMC stopped using the hydraulic fluid with PCBs.

OMC said it did not know about the cancer-causing PCBs in the fluid until 1976 when environmental agencies told them of the problem.

That may very well be true. But the question remains: Does that absolve them of blame? Even though OMC may be "the victim of circumstances" as Strang said, does that mean federal money should go to correcting the problem?

Some may argue that if the government has set aside $300 million then what's $5 million if it cleans up a dangerous pollution problem.

The point is, perhaps, that industry cannot maintain a cavalier attitude toward the environment.

OMC should put its money where its mouth is when it claims: "OMC is concerned about environmental quality. Our products are used by sportfishermen, commercial fishermen and other water sports enthusiasts. Our very livelihood depends on clean water. Obviously we feel a very keen responsibility for maintaining and upgrading the environment."

The proof is in the harbor. Who will pay, aside from all of us, eventually?