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Monster lurks in harbor

Pollution by PCBs poses a continuing peril



Joe Manning comments

At the bottom of the north end of peaceful, tranquil, pleasant Waukegan Harbor lies a monster. Shades of some Japanese horror flick. The monster has the potential for killing because it is made of an insidious ingredient called PCB.

The monster is estimated to weigh 200,000 pounds. One can envision this large, translucent, sticky blob rising from the water of the quiet harbor, toppling all those expensive boats, destroying boat slips people have waited years to get and pursuing screaming masses across the city until a fortunate radiation leak at Commonwealth Edison's nuclear powered generating plant in Zion destroys the creature.

It happened that way in the movies, but not in real life. Yet, there is a monster in the harbor and it is every bit as uncontrollable as anything in a horror film.

Not only do people not know what to do about it, they can't even get it straight who is supposed to do what.

We do know Johnson Outboards wants to do more -- that is, put more PCBs into the waters of Lake Michigan.

And it's entirely possible the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency will allow it. The Illinois EPA will almost be forced to allow it because it has created a monster of it's own.

Three years ago the cancer-causing agent polychlorinated biphenyls, known better as PCB, was found to be flowing out of Johnson Outboards into the harbor.

Two years ago OMC agreed to stop it and to rectify the terrible situation. The Illinois EPA suggested OMC build an entirely new sewer system and seal up the old one so no more PCBs would seep into the water.

OMC agreed and spent $750,000 on new sewers. The new sewer drains into old Lake Michigan which is getting older by the minute.

Even though the sewer is operating now it still needs an operating permit -- despite the fact Illinois EPA was behind the construction in the first place.

Now it's up to the Illinois EPA to approve or disapprove the sewer system it asked OMC to build.

"We are trying to figure out what to do," said EPA attorney John Bernbom. "Regardless of the action, it will be the subject of criticism."

If the EPA doesn't approve the permit, OMC will sue. If the EPA approves the permit to operate the sewer, "citizens and sportsmens' groups will see to it that it is adjudicated. Regardless, we will end up in an adversary context," said Bernbom.

The sewer will only drain rain water runoff into Lake Michigan. But since the sewer trains into the lake it must have a permit. And since the runoff will be from OMC's property it will contain PCB.

OMC, however, argues that the rain water itself contains PCB. And that it does, according to a DePaul University study. Other PCBs come from

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PCB pollution poses continuing lake peril

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anywhere on the property the rain happens to pick them up.

OMC wants the EPA to allow PCB particles to number 10 in one billion. The number is awfully small. Yet, fish with fewer particles than that are considered dangerous to eat. Eating PCBs can be very bad for one's liver — at least it is for laboratory animals.

So, to approve the sewer or not to approve the sewer, that's anybody's guess now. It's only our drinking water.

But back to the harbor, where PCB is not measured in parts per billion but in pounds. PCB was used at OMC for many years as a machine lubricant. It was bought from Monsanto Chemical of St. Louis and came in cans labled "Pydraul."

OMC's Hugh Thomas, a lawyer, said the cans did not list the ingredients. For years PCBs flowed from machines to floor drains to the harbor, where it has been found in sediment eight feet below the harbor bottom.

OMC said it would do something about it more than a year ago. Of course you have to study something before you do anything about it. OMC hired a fact-finding consultant firm. Findings were mailed to the EPA and OMC is now waiting to hear from it on what to do, said Thomas.

But wait a minute, says EPA's Bernbom, OMC is supposed to come up with the idea of what to do, not the EPA.

"We are not consulting engineers. The people of Illinois did not cause the problem. We don't say how you do it, here's how you solve it," Bernbom said.

He said it is up to OMC to choose a course of action to solve the problem of getting the PCBs out of the harbor. But OMC better come up with something: "They are under no particular deadline but they do have a violation and that violation is continuing."

Bernbom said "the tchnology does exist" which would allow OMC to clean up the harbor without stirring up the pollution settled on the bottom (our monster, remember?)

OMC claims it did not know the harbor was being polluted with the dangerous stuff until the firm learned of it from the EPA.

So be it. That's history. What do we do now? Don't go near the water. If you must, don't fall in. If you do, don't bite the monster. It might bite you back in a few years.