BERKSHIRE EAGLE 8/8/75

GE here says disposal changes reduce harm to fish from PCB

By Kirk Scharfenberg

Fish taken from the waters of the Housatonic River below the General Electric plant here in the summer of 1971, were found to contain dangerous levels of the toxic chemical PCB, the deputy director of the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife said this morning.

Since that time, GE has made radical changes in the way it disposes of the waste transformer insulating fluid containing containing the PCB that it utilizes.

James H. Thayer, GE's manager of environmental protection, said he had strong doubts about the adequacy of the state's 1971 tests, doubts he said were shared by some in the state government, and added that he was "rather astonished" that the data had been released now.

Thayer noted further that GE has a permit from the Federal Environmental Protection Agency to discharge a tiny amount of the transformer insulating fluid, Pyranol, into the Housatonic but had "never yet approached let alone exceeded" the allowed EPA limits.

A statement issued by GE here this morning said that more recent studies had found that less than one-quarter pound of PCB is reaching the east branch of the Housatonic daily and said most of that was a residue from 40 years of use accumulated in pipes, drains and the ground.

"Little, if any," the statement said, "is from current transformer operations."

Colton Bridges, the deputy director of the state Division of Fisheries and Game, said this morning that even if no new PCB is being introduced into the waters of the Housatonic, their concentrations could continue to build up in fish. He said that buildup could come either through contact with PCBs previously collected by the river's sediment

GE disposal changes
Continued on Page 11

GE disposal changes aid river fish

Continued from Page 1

or through the the fishes' organic pool chain.

"There would be continued uptake in the food chain but perhaps at a much lesser level," Bridges said.

Yesterday New York State officials warned against eating striped bass from the Hudson River because of high PCB levels found in the fish there. Those bass had an average concentration of PCB of 1.7 parts per million. The highest concentration reported in the striped bass there was 37 parts per million.

Bridges said that two batches of five white suckers were taken from below the GE plant in 1971 and that the average concentration of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) found in those two groups was 5.1 and 69.4 parts per million respectively.

He said that one fish was found to contain 79.4 parts per million of PCB.

Bridges said that as part of the same 1971 study, five brook trout taken from above the GE plant were examined and found to contain no PCB.

Bridges said he was not qualified to comment on the public health implications of the 1971 study. He said no similar study of PCB concentrations in the fish of the Housatonic has been made since 1971 and that in fact his division no longer has the capability of making such studies.

He said such programs were cut out of the division's budget about two years ago for financial reasons. "There should be a monitoring capability in the state vested in some fish and wildlife agency," he declared.

GE officials noted this morning that in 1971, when the study was made, there was no ban on the use of PCB and that it was widely used in a variety of manufacturing processes, including paints, specialty inks, papercoatings, plastics, hydrolics and heat transfer liquids.

Subsequently, use of PCBs has been limited to sealed products such as transformers.

While alternate fluids exist for some transformer applications in which PCB was previously employed, GE said there are others where only PCB can be used because it is nonflammable.

"In no case," GE said this morning, "do the present alternatives offer the characteristics of nonflammability that seem mandatory for certain applications. For example, the case of a transformer under a commuter railroad car. Would it be prudent to use a flammable liquid in such a product?"

GE said, "Our experience in nearly 40 years of use here in Pittsfield is similar to medical records over the country during the same period. This record shows that the only adverse health effects experienced by workers exposed to PCB have been limited to occasional skin irritations which clear up quickly."

The principal change in disposing of waste fluids at GE made in recent years was the installation of a high-temperature incinerator in 1973. It burns up the oil and has received high praise from state and federal environmental officials. The federal Environmental Protection Agency is now studying it as a model for disposing of hazardous material.

The GE facilities in Hudson Falls, N.Y., do not have a similar facility, and that plant was cited by the New York officials yesterday as one source of PCB in the Hudson River.

In its statement released here today, GE said, in summary, that it "does not feel that the use of PCBs in sealed transformers constitutes a serious danger to people or the environment. We have taken major steps to prevent the inadvertent loss of PCB to the environment at all stages, from equipment manufacture through ultimate disposal."

MONS 030728