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Toxic PCBs replaced in capacitors

COLUMBIA, S.C. (UPI) — McGraw-Edison Co. has announced it will begin Nov. 1 using a more environmentally acceptable substitute for the toxic chemical PCB as an insulating fluid in its manufacture of power capacitors.

Robert H. Keith, general manager of the Greenwood plant of McGraw-Edison's Power Systems Division, said the company, a major producer of high-voltage power capacitors, will replace PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) with Edisol, which was developed jointly with the Dow Chemical Co.

A similar announcement was made at the division's headquarters in Pittsburgh.

The Edison-insulated capacitors will cost about 25% more than the present PCB models, he said. The cost of converting production at the plant will be "several hundreds of thousands of dollars," Keith said.

"We are firmly convinced Edisol can do a better job than PCBs," he said.

Edisol is a more reliable and environmentally acceptable chemical with a longer life expectancy, Keith said.

PCBs, chemical compounds derived from benzene and used for more than 40 years, are suspected carcinogens that have been linked to cancer, miscarrages, skin diseases and other ailments. A high concentration of PCBs was found recently in fish in Lake Hartwell.

Keith said two-thirds of recent orders for power capacitors, which are used by utilities to provide better electrical service, have specified the non-PCB fluid.

There are some economic risks involved in the changeover if customers continue to ask for PCB power capacitors, which also are manufactured by Sangamo Electric Co., General Electric and Westinghouse, he said.

Monsanto Chemical, the sole U.S. supplier of PCBs, has indicated it wants to get out of the business, and the cost will increase as the supply dwindles, he said. That will lower differential between PCB and Edisol capacitors.

The motivation for the change "was the recognition in 1970 that this (PCBs) would become an increasing problem — which it has," Keith said.

Rather stringent measures were taken to minimize the discharge of PCBs when the Greenwood plant was built in 1973, Keith said, addim it is impossible to eliminate the discharge of the chemical as long as it is used in the production process.