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Waukegan Harbor PCB cleanup stalled

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By Joan Zyda

WAUKEGAN HARBOR—with tons of dangerous PCB chemicals in its mucky depths—is rated the most serious and most complex water pollution problem in the Great Lakes.

But the northern Illinois harbor probably won't be cleaned up for several years because of a web of lawsuits and countersuits and conflicting environmental and engineering studies, a federal environmental official has said.

"I wish there was an easy and fast solution," said John McGuire, Region 5 administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), "but we are facing a very knotty problem.

"Even if we move expeditiously, it may take a few years," McGuire told an informational meeting on the case sponsored by the Lake Michigan Federation, an activist environmental group, last week in Waukegan. "We can't remove any PCBs until we have all the studies, assessments and impact statements done—the whole works."

AT THE SAME time, Tom Nedved, chief environmental engineer for the Lake County Health Department, cautioned that the PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are a "serious health threat" to humans, fish, and wildlife that "we must do something about immediately."

Nedved said he didn't think the PCBs have contaminated Lake County's drinking water, whose source is from far out in Lake Michigan, but he said commercial ships often stir up the sentiments, and PCB-contaminated fish could be transmitting the pollutants.

Medical scientists have documented that among the long-term effects of PCBs are, severe skin and eye irritation, cancer, and reproductive disorders.

"It must be a cause of vital concern," said Nedved. "The long-term effects of this could have a devastating impact on public health here."

NEDVED CALLED the EPA's lack of an immediate remedy "frustrating" and added that the agency's own red-tape has created an "unsurmountable obstacle" to public health.

But McGuire said studies are needed to show how much of a problem the PCBs are to the area, and what exactly should be done about them. "If the studies aren't done and if a solution is haphazardly chosen, it could be worse than the problem," he said.

McGuire pointed out that three "knotty" questions facing federal judges and marine engineers on the Waukegan Harbor issue include: Who is responsible for the cleanup? Can the PCBs be removed without further damage to Lake Michigan? And how much would removal—an engineering project unprecedented in scope—cost, and who should pay?

ANSWERS TO those questions and others are expected to come out of three lawsuits filed earlier this year in Federal District Court.

Outboard Marine Corp., of Waukegan, the firm which admitted discharging the PCBs into the harbor over an 18-year period ending in 1971, filed suit first against the EPA, seeking that the agency be ordered to study the extent of the contamination and what, if anything, should be done.

EPA countersued, demanding that Outboard Marine conduct this expensive research and, if necessary, remove and dispose of the contaminated sediments. The Illinois attorney general's office also filed a similar suit against the Waukegan firm, which has in turn asked that Monsanto Chemical Co., of St. Louis, which supplied it with a hydraulic fluid that contained PCB, be included as a defendant.