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Environmental Commentary

by John Harris-Cronin

As if governmental ineptitude had not already sunk to a new low, New York State officials have begun taking shots at Environmental Commissioner Ogden Reid for his tough-minded initiation of enforcement proceedings against the PCB-discharging General Electric plants at Fort Edward and Hudson Falls, N.Y.

Undaunted by the fact that the environmental commissioner was in the midst of a judicial proceeding, Commerce Commissioner John Dyson accused Ogden Reid of using the PCB issue as a political ploy and took up the favorite industrial line that strict environmental controls would mean loss of jobs.

Dyson, admitting to being, "a little vague" about PCBs still felt sure enough of himself to opine that the public interest would best be served if the PCB issue were dropped. As Dyson's remarks were still drawing comments such as "injudicious," "irresponsible," "uneducated," Hugh Carey announced he was about to step in and overturn Reid's order for GE to obtain zero discharge of PCBs by September, 1976.

The Governor has since rescinded his statement after being advised he was moving outside his authority.

Throughout the mud-slinging, Ogden Reid remained appropriately low key - as an administrator involved in an enforcement proceeding should - to, in his words, "respect the integrity of the hearing process."

Now the verdict is in. Professor Abraham Sofaer, in a very scholarly decision, has found the evidence against GE "overwhelming," and has upheld all but one of the charges brought by the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Professor Sofaer's decision not only reiterated the gravity of GE's pollution activities, but clearly established the link, between the company's actions and the extraordinary contamination of Hudson River fish, water and sediments with polychlorinated biphenyls.

John Dyson, meanwhile, has shifted into a different gear. He is now calling into question the value of the Hudson fishery, characterizing it as worth only hundreds of thousands per year. One hesitates to even dignify such blatantly uneducated remarks. If monetary value is what one needs to deem the Hudson fishery important, or the need to protect the nation's health, then the Hudson's fishery is worth closer to a hundred million dollars per year. It is well documented as a result of the Storm King hearings that the Hudson estuary, its spawning grounds, and its nursery are essential parts of the entire East Coast fishery. The tremendous striped bass industry, which thrives from Long Island to Massachusetts, depends upon the Hudson.

Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy came to bat for the Hudson during the Storm King controversy not because he loved the Hudson so, but to defend the multi-million dollar industry that is a vital part of his own constituency.

When the value of the Hudson fishery is added to the studies demonstrating that PCBs cause liver cancer in laboratory rats, and interferes with the reproductive process of not only fish but the higher primates as well, one wonders if a state official being "a little vague" about the toxic contamination of food and drinking water may not be very derelict.

As for Governor Carey, his actions on PCBs, and his subsequent objections to the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR), which also found voice in John Dyson, have established a clear pattern. Carey's call to "strike a balance" in New York means permitting GE to continue dumping PBCs into the Hudson, and bows to the stiff resistance of the construction and real estate interests who don't like SEQR. Carey's campaign promises on issues such as environment and energy are now being shown for what they really were - just part of the soap-boxing and the flesh-pressing.

The PCB crisis demonstrates how our federal and state bureaucracies have clearly failed us. The truth was hidden from the public, years of inaction prolonged and increased the contamination, and now politically motivated interference seeks to obstruct the proper course of action instituted by a responsible state official.

Undoubtedly the strategy of making environmental concerns and economic well-being mutually exclusive will be a familiar theme of the Carey administration., whether it is Mr. Carey or his underlings who mouth the words. New York State deserves better than this simplistic reasoning from its leader.

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