S.F. EXAMINER • Thurs., Mar. 11, 82

GE exposed workers to PCB, suit says

By Beth Hughes
Examiner staff writer

OAKLAND — A class-action suit accuses General Electric Co. of knowingly exposing workers at its Oakland plant to the toxic chemical PCB and of failing to warn or protect the workers and their families.

The suit, filed yesterday in Alameda County Superior Court by the PCB Project, a Sonoma County-based group, and seven Dishmond-based Hispanics, which named the polychlorinated biphenyls.

"The employees had workers to believe they could go swimming in it (PCB)," said Allen Lerch, the San Francisco attorney who filed the suit.

"Yet current rules for people with PCB exposure are at an elaborate state," said Chamber Bechtel, a PCB Project volunteer who accompanied Lerch.

GE replied to the suit by detailing its PCB cleanup efforts at its Oakland plant, which is still in use. A Hispanic spokesman could not be reached for comment.

PCB is an odorless, colorless, syrupy material first manufactured in 1929. Until its manufacture was outlawed in 1976, it was a popular insulating fluid for heavy-duty electrical equipment, such as that built and repaired by GE at the yard at 8440 East 14th St.

The suit was filed on behalf of 320 GE employees who worked at the Oakland yard between 1955 and 1976. During that period, the facility was used to repair transformers, many of them insulated with PCB.

The plaintiffs named are Ronaldo Chiaverini, James Peter Chiaverini, James Inarticibar, Patrick Mantis and Curtis Boyer Jones. They are former GE workers and family members.

Workers' families, who may have been inadvertently exposed to PCBs and other toxins through contact with the employees' clothing and equipment, are included as plaintiffs.

Lerch said the suit will be amended within the next week to include residents of the surrounding neighborhood as plaintiffs.

The suit alleges GE and Monsanto failed:

• To warn employees of the risks they run working with PCBs.

• To provide protective measures or take precautions to prevent employees' exposure to the PCBs.

Because of these actions, the suit contends, the workers and their families suffered "infections and diseases of the skin, high blood pressure, damage to the eyes, severe ejaculation, fatigue, nausea, general pain and suffering, soreness and severe emotional distress from the injuries suffered and from the fear of future ill effects ..."

Lerch did not ask for a specific dollar figure for damages because "if the damages are what we think they will be, this will be a multimillion-dollar suit."

The Oakland GE yard was cited as PCB-contaminated in 1978, and state health officials ordered a cleanup in October of that year.

A plan to dust more than 200,000 cubic yards of contaminated dirt into sealed drums for disposal at an approved PCB dump was drafted as an emergency measure.

Instead, the yard was sealed over with asphalt or concrete covering.

An independent hazardous waste consultant, Hart Lathrop, has completed the $3.5 million project.

He said the topping prevents rainfall from coming in contact with the contaminated soil.

Lathrop estimated that PCBs contaminated the yard's soil to a depth of 20 to 40 feet.

The PCB Project said contamination went as deep as 60 feet and called the asphalt covering a "sham."

"PCBs are omnipresent. They'll seep through this blacktop," Bechtel said yesterday, pointing the Oakland yard to Love Canal, a New York state chemical waste dump on land under which toxic wastes seeped to abandon their homes.

Lathrop designed and installed an elaborate system of gutters and drains to draw all rainwater that falls on the site into an underground pool.

The water is then cleansed of any PCBs and piped through a PCB-content monitoring device before being released into the city's storm drains.

Lathrop said the system guarantees that no contaminated water leaves the site.

→ We have got to respond to this statement

MONS 011550