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PCB suit is filed for GE employees

By Del Lane
Tribune Staff Writer

A class action damage suit was filed Wednesday in Alameda County Superior Court on behalf of some 300 former General Electric Co. employees at its East Oakland plant, charging they were negligently exposed to toxic chemicals, including polychlorinated biphenyls.

Also named in the suit were the Monsanto Corp., U.S. manufacturer of PCBs, and up to 200 unnamed individuals and companies involved in its sale or distribution.

Listed as plaintiffs in the suit, which asks for an unspecified amount of actual and punitive damages, are five former GE employees or their relatives: Renaldo Chiaverini, James Chiaverini, James Inerbickler, Patrick Mastin and Curtis R. Jones.

At a news conference called to announce the suit's filing, Chamber Bechtel, spokeswoman for the Santa Rosa-based PCB Project, contended that state health inspectors had found the 24-acre site at 54th Avenue and East 14th Street was contaminated with the chemical to depths up to 40 feet.

She said that although the company had stopped manufacturing and repairing electrical transformers — in which the nonflammable PCB oil was used for insulation — at the plant in 1975, the company's cleanup work has consisted of blacktopping the contaminated areas, which she contended forced the PCBs into a wider area.

She said the toxic substance had been found in a nearby food-processing plant and neighboring residences.

San Francisco attorney Allen

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Lerch, who filed the suit, said the five individual plaintiffs were chosen because their complaints represent the full spectrum of complaints reported by the former GE employees — ailments that include cancer, respiratory problems, hypertension and skin disorders.

Karl Lathrop, a GE executive placed in charge of the site cleanup ordered by the state last December, said he could not comment on the suit because he had not seen it. But he said the plant had been "modestly contaminated due to spills."

He said the Pyranol oil used in transformer manufacture there between 1927 and 1975 contained less than 10 percent PCBs and almost none of them left the plant site except in sealed transformers.

The average employment at the plant during the manufacturing phase, he said, was 150 to 200 people, and about 125 since then.

Lathrop said the cleanup work, "for all intents and purposes," was complete and that Wednesday was his last day at the site.

The GE plant is now used to manufacture equipment not involving PCBs.

Jack Batty, a GE spokesman at corporate headquarters in Fairfield, Conn., said the company would have no comment on the suit until it had been served copies.

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