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OMC won't fund PCB cleaning of lake

By ART PETERSON
Staff Writer

Outboard Marine Corp. will not contribute any funding to, but will cooperate with, a project aimed at easing the threat to Lake Michigan of contamination from heavy PCB pollution in the North Ditch, officials of the Waukegan-based firm decided Wednesday afternoon.

The decision drew harsh criticism from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Lake Michigan Federation, a Chicago-based environmental group.

John McGuire, regional director for the U.S. EPA, said urgent action is necessary to prevent a release of "great quantities" of PCBs into the lake next spring. The ditch and Waukegan Harbor have been identified as the worst site in the U.S. for PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), a highly toxic chemical that has been proven to cause cancer and reproductive failures in laboratory animals. Humans have been cautioned to eat no more than one meal weekly of large fish from the lake.

McGuire last Friday, in a move separate from the ongoing lawsuits over the PCB pollution, proposed a North Ditch project he started immediately and asked OMC to accept responsibility for the work. He indicated that if OMC would not accept responsibility the U.S. EPA, working with the U.S. Coast Guard, could secure the necessary funding.

OMC officials Wednesday decided not to participate and released the following statement: "Last Friday the U.S. EPA asked Outboard Marine Corp. whether we or the EPA should proceed with, as yet, unidentified measures, to deal

with the alleged PCB accumulation in a drainage ditch on the north side of our property.

"After careful consideration we have concluded that the EPA is best-suited to proceed with the proposed actions. We have indicated to them that we will cooperate fully with their efforts. As we and others have been saying for several years, the EPA has the authority, expertise and very likely the responsibility to resolve what it has identified as an environmental problem which originated before the environmental laws were passed. Most importantly, the PCB situation seems to be well on its way to resolution."

Asked how OMC intended to cooperate, Hugh Thomas, OMC senior counsel, said, "We will give the EPA full access to the ditch at reasonable times and make available the studies we have conducted."

"At this point that would be the sum total of our cooperation," he added, saying no funding would be provided. "We are willing to talk further, for same type of solution to the harbor and the ditch. The harbor is not part of the EPA's current considerations."

"In our opinion several parties may have financial responsibilities, including Monsanto Chemical Corp., OMC, and both the Illinois and U.S. EPAs," said Thomas. "Monsanto invented, manufactured and was the sole supplier of the hydraulic fluid that consumed the PCBs. They refused on several occasions to identify what it is it." OMC has not purchased the fluid since 1971.

The OMC decision drew immediate and harsh criticism

from the Lake Michigan Federation. Brad Marston, assistant federation director, said, "It is certainly disappointing that OMC officials do not feel they are in a position to exhibit the environmental consciousness that they have been professing for so long. This indicates their real environmental consciousness."

"Because of a lack of a mandate, they are taking the easy way out," Marston said.

Recent studies have shown that over 400 pounds of PCBs would be washed out of the ditch into the lake next spring, unless preventive measures are quickly taken, Marston said. The ditch is estimated to contain two million pounds of the toxic chemical.

McGuire had indicated that the U.S. EPA could secure funds with the Coast Guard through a section of the Clean Water Act which empowers the agency to remove hazardous substances discharged to navigable waters that could present a substantial danger to public health.

Several alternatives are being evaluated by EPA engineers, including dredging out the ditch, but the proposal most likely would involve the installation of a system of culverts and coffer dams, along with a groundwater retention pond, to prevent the mixing of the ditch sediments, which are high in PCBs, with the lake water.

The culverts would carry the surface water runoff to a retention pond, while the coffer dams would limit the contaminated PCB-laden sediments within the ditch.

The project is estimated to cost \$400,000 and is projected for completion by March 1, 1980.

McGuire told The News-Sun late Wednesday the OMC decision "is one of a series of outlandish and irresponsible actions by OMC. They have already put several million pounds of PCBs into Lake Michigan and here had the opportunity to, with minimum effort, remove a few hundred pounds."

"It is especially ironic that OMC, which makes its profits selling outboard motors to sportsmen, continues a callous disregard of fishermen who have to worry about eating fish out of the lake that are contaminated with PCBs."

"We believe strongly that the legal structure is not sufficient to meet the environmental needs," said McGuire. "The Clean Water Act provides authority to prevent new pollution, but there is no authority to clean up existing contamination. We are hopeful that HB 6566, now before Congress, will allow us to proceed with a cleanup and assess charges to those responsible."

"We could be tied up for an unlimited period of time in the courts, stuck for four to five years without cleaning up the fundamental problem in the harbor," McGuire said. "We can expect further obstructionist efforts from OMC, despite their pious announcements."

McGuire said the U.S. EPA will proceed with the North Ditch project. Final engineering reports are expected back "in a week to 10 days," he added, "with construction starting in 30 to 45 days."

"We can count on OMC to try to stop or stall the work," McGuire concluded.