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Waukegan chemical peril

EPA orders company to clean up PCB ditch

By Joan Zyda

THE UNITED States Environmental Protection Agency ordered Outboard Marine Corp. of Waukegan Friday to take immediate measures to prevent further discharge of dangerous PCB chemicals from its North Ditch property into Lake Michigan.

"That ditch is totally contaminated," said John McGuire, EPA regional administrator. "It's urgent that action be taken right now, or else literally hundreds of pounds of PCBs will enter the lake with next spring's rain and snow melt."

McGuire said the firm has until the middle of next week to develop some way to seal off the toxic ditch on its property. He said the company will have to divert water from the ditch, install water pipes over the ditch, "or come up with some other engineering alternative."

IF THE firm declines responsibility, McGuire said, the EPA has already received authorization to commit federal funds, available under the Clean Water Act, to take immediate corrective measures on its own.

McGuire estimated the cost of such measures at nearly $400,000. "The federal government would spend the money now and deal with the reimbursement issue later," he said. "But we must give the company an opportunity to take this action on its own."

The EPA's order, McGuire pointed out, "is not for a cleanup but a move to prevent further degradation of the lake."

Brad Marion, assistant director of the Lake Michigan Federation, an environmental group fighting the PCB problem, praised the EPA decision, "It's the first step and an important one, but we still have a long way to go."

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

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