NORTH ADAMS, MASS.
TRANSCRIPT
D. 13,500

APR 19 1976

Businessmen host EPA director

Compromise looms in battle over PCBs

By MICHAEL W. MUNLEY

NORTH ADAMS—The government's battle against PCBs used by Sprague Electric Co. here and General Electric Co. in Pittsfield has taken on the look of contract talks at the bargaining table.

In contract talks, at the outset anyway, posture is everything. But politics is the art of the possible and environmental enforcement appears to be no exception. Compromise will rule.

Postures assumed during the last two weeks, however opposed they seem, could still allow government and industry to find a way during the next 30 days of negotiations to do more than cut down the amount of polychlorinated biphenyls going into the Hoosac and Housatonic rivers.

The two sides had lunch together Friday, playing genial host and guest. The hosts were businessmen, including executives from Sprague and GE. The guest was John A.G. McGlennon, New England director of the Environmental Protection Agency.

As if he didn't know, the director asked executives from both companies about details of the limits on PCB discharges which his agency had proposed only a week before. Of course, he knew the limits amount to virtually eliminating PCBs coming from Sprague and GE. And the executives went through the motions of telling him they don't think that's possible by July 1977.

He listened for a while to specifics. Then, in between lunch chatter about cross country skiing and Massachusetts politics, he talked in general terms and on both sides of the environmental fence.

PCBs pose a threat to public health, he said, because of studies that show internal and skin diseases resulting from exposure to high amounts of the chemicals. Sprague and GE use them to insulate closed electrical systems.

The nation has no law that allows EPA to ban new, hazardous chemicals before the fact, said Mr. McGlennon, but a toxic substances bill that would allow testing and banning before new chemicals are used may well pass Congress this year.

He also said that the real answer to how much PCBs are allowable is not to use the chemicals at all. And therein lies the chance for bargaining in his agency's negotiations with Sprague and GE.

"I don't think we can go around beating people over the head and expect to reach our goals," he said at one point. Later he promised businessmen protection against "unreasonable, unrealistic and unfeasible" limits on pollution.

Could Mr. McGlennon be using the discharge permit process to accomplish the ban on PCBs that his agency cannot otherwise attain?

If GE and Sprague promise to ban PCBs, say, over the next five years, the federal agency could ease up on the limits proposed 10 days ago.

Then, when a toxic substances bill becomes law and the agency has the power to ban PCBs, GE's customers and Sprague's customers will already be living with the knowledge that the days of PCBs are numbered.

And for GE and Sprague, that may be the essence of their effort to postpone tough action on PCBs now. Everybody in industry must know that PCBs are on the way out, but who takes the first big step of admitting it? The maker, Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co. of St. Louis, or users like Sprague and GE, or their customers, or the makers of air conditioners, transformers, computers?

Through the negotiated discharge permit to be issued after the public comment period ends May 17, the federal government appears to be taking the first step, putting industry on notice that, yes, PCBs must be replaced.

The use of PCBs goes back 40 years and was widespread in industry until discovery during the 1960s of the impact on health in animals and humans. In 1972, Monsanto voluntarily agreed to limit its PCB sales to industries using it in closed systems, without exposure during manufacturing to people on the assembly line.

But before that PCBs escaped into air, water and soil. They build up and they're tough, say experts, and they may never be wiped out. In that sense, the whole battle against PCBs over the last year has been a compromise.

MONS 036653