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Chemist Questions GE Findings About PCB Concentrations In Fish

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ALBANY—A research chemist for the federal Environmental Protection Agency testified Tuesday that the General Electric Company's findings about PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) concentrations in fish samples are in error.

Dr. Gilman Veith, one of the nation's top authorities on PCB's and a chemist for the EPA's National Water Quality Laboratory in Duluth, Minn., said GE's findings "directly contradict the analysis done by the state Department of Environmental Conservation and by us."

Veith said GE's findings were "not in the least" impressive because of 11 sampling errors he had found.

Dr. Veith's comments came during the second day of defense testimony for General Electric, which is charged by the state Department of Environmental Conservation with violating state water quality laws through the discharge of PCB's into the Hudson River. The state is conducting hearings to determine whether GE must halt all discharges of PCB's into the Hudson from its plants at Fort Edward and Hudson Falls by Sept. 30, 1976.

Earlier in the day Dr. Gerald Lauer, vice president of Ecological Analysts, Inc. of Middletown, N.Y. said that an analysis of 13 sampled fish collected between Oct. 17 and Nov. 4 showed that the PCB content ranged from .11 to 2.7 parts per million (ppm).

Lauer said an analysis by the Woodson-Tenent Laboratories of Memphis, Tenn. showed that the PCB level in the non-edible portions of the fish was 6.79 ppm, or about one-sixth of the current federal Food and Drug Administration maximum allowable standard of 5.0 ppm.

The fish were taken from the Hudson both above and below GE's plants and included smallmouth bass, yellow perch, pickerel, pumpkinseed, brown bullheads, common suckers and rock bass.

He admitted, however, that samples of the non-edible portions of the fish, such as the head, tail, and internal organs, had PCB concentrations of up to 197 ppm—or almost 40 times higher than the level which the federal government considers to be safe.

Dr. Lauer's testimony sharply contradicts the findings of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the U.S. Department of the Interior and the EPA. The state found that rock bass in the vicinity of the two GE plants had PCB levels as high as 350 ppm. Dr. Lauer's studies found three rock bass to have an average PCB level of .20 ppm—a level some 1,750 times lower.

Similarly, the Interior Department found that fish taken from the Hudson River had the highest level of PCB contamination of any of its 150 testing stations in the United States. Earlier in the hearing Dr. David L. Stalling of the Interior Department's Fish Pesticide Laboratory in Columbia, Mo. testified that goldfish caught at Poughkeepsie had PCB concentrations as high as 213 ppm.

In a related matter, GE announced Tuesday that only two of its employes have ever had to take sick leave because of illnesses received by working with PCB's in the two GE plants. Company officials declined, however, to say who these employes are or to say what kind of illness they received.

On Nov. 10, the company admitted that at least 65 of its employes had become ill during the past 13 years because of exposure to PCB's. The company said at that time that 49 of these workers had complained of allergic dermatitis and that 16 others had reported nausea, dizziness, eye irritation, nasal irritation and asthmatic bronchitis.

PCB's are used by GE in the manufacture of capacitors at its two upper Hudson plants. PCB's are similar in structure to DDT and both state and local officials are concerned about their discharge into the environment because they have been shown to cause cancer, liver disease, reproductive failure, skin disease and a variety of other ailments in laboratory test animals.

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