PCB's Made 65 Sick, General Electric Says

General Electric Company, one of the nation's major users of the polychlorinated biphenyls or PCB's, last week admitted that sixty-five of its employees were diagnosed as having been made ill by the controversial compounds during the past fifteen years.

GE's disclosure was in a written answer to interrogatories of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, which has accused the electrical products manufacturer of violating the state conservation laws by dumping PCB's into the Hudson River.

The company has been using PCB's in the manufacture of capacitors at its plant at Fort Edward, N.Y., since 1947 and at Hudson Falls, N.Y., since 1951.

In the last fifteen years, it says, forty-nine employees reported to its industrial dispensaries at the two manufacturing facilities "complaining of allergic dermatitis, diagnosed as having been caused by contact with PCB's."

"During this period, sixteen other employees have reported one or more of the following which may have been caused by or aggravated by exposure to PCB's: nausea, dizziness, eye irritation, nasal irritation, asthmatic bronchitis, fungus, acne."

Actually the company can show no dramatic cases before 1965 and only one of the "other conditions" cases before 1966. It says that during the period extending from 1960 to 1975 about 1,300 employees worked in areas exposed to PCB's.

In previous testimony, Dr. Edward L. Simons of GE said in May, 1974, that "the only medical effects that had been reported during the four decades that we were in this business have been occasional cases of chloracne or other minor skin irritations of a non-chronic nature which disappeared upon the transfer of the employee to some other operations."

GE refused last week to say what recommendations the plant physicians made in the sixty-five cases—or to disclose the names of the people who were ill because "the recommendation of the plant physician is contained in a medical report which is privileged."

GE also refused to comply completely with the state's request for reports the company made, or had made for it, which identified "where PCB's are or may be caused to be discharged to the environment from the manufacturing facilities," or "estimated discharge of PCB's to the environment from the manufacturing facilities" or discussed methods of abating or removing such PCB's from the manufacturing facilities effluent or discharge."

The company also refused to state the locations of landfills it has used to dispose of its PCB's and materials contaminated with them.

New York state officials have expressed fear that PCB's in landfills may be reaching into the Hudson River (see CMR, 9/22/75, pg. 5 and pg. 20).

The company, did say, however, that it twice made estimates of losses of PCB's from point sources at its Hudson Falls and Fort Edward plants. On October 28, 1971, it said, a 250ppb discharge from the combined plants put 6.2 pounds a day of PCB's into the river. This is assuming a flow of water of 3 million gallons a day from the two plants; but in a footnote, GE says it now believes the flow was only half that.

On February 7, 1974, the company continues, a flow of 4,000 ppb put 15.9 pounds a day of PCB's into the river at Fort Edward and a flow of 350 ppb discharged 5.5 pounds a day from Hudson Falls. This assumes a volume of 2.1 million gallons of water from the Hudson Falls plant but as in the earlier measurement GE now thinks the "estimated flows were overstated by 100 percent."

These discharge estimates are considerably lower than those estimated in a number of other reports on the GE plants, some of which placed them as high as 90 pounds of PCB's a day. Ogden Reid, State Commissioner for Environmental Conservation, estimates past discharges at 50 pounds a day and five pounds currently.

The state wants the company to reduce its discharges to two pounds a day by December 31, 1975, and zero by September 30, 1976.

Recent fish sampling in the vicinity of the companies two plants, according to the state, found PCB concentrations far exceeding FDA's 5 parts per million standard for human consumption. These samples include a small-mouth bass with 127 ppm.

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