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PCB Hearing Begins

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WASHINGTON—Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Russell Train is slated to testify on the need for strengthened federal pollution laws as Congressional hearings on PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) contamination of the Hudson River and other waterways begins today.

"These are oversight hearings," said Nancy Matthews, a press aide to Rep. Richard Ottinger, D-N.Y., 24th District. "The purpose of these hearings before the Fisheries, Wildlife, Conservation and the Environment subcommittee are to show the frailties of the federal government's efforts to deal with toxic substances and to see whether new laws should be enacted."

Scheduled to testify today are Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nathaniel Reed; William Papageorge from Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co., St. Louis, Mo.; Clifford Tuttle of Aerovox Industries, a user of PCB's, and Train. The hearings before the subcommittee of the House Merchant Marine Committee are scheduled to continue Thursday and Friday.

In other developments concerning PCB's:

—Monsanto, the nation's sole manufacturer of the controversial industrial chemical, has announced plans to phase out the production of PCB's. F.J. Fitzgerald, a Monsanto vice president, said no timetable has been set for the phaseout, but "it would be done in a planned and orderly manner."

—The General Electric Co. has formally told the federal Environmental Protection Agency that it cannot meet the agency's proposed zero discharge limits on PCB's at its Fort Edward and Hudson Falls plants. The EPA had called for a 3 ½ ounce daily discharge limit into the upper Hudson River by May 1977, but in December announced plans to require a zero discharge level by June 30, 1977.

—A decision regarding the state Department of Environmental Conservation's efforts to achieve a zero discharge of PCB's into the upper Hudson by Sept. 30, 1976 is expected to be announced within the next week by Columbia University law professor Abraham Sofaer. If Sofaer rules that GE must comply with Environmental Conservation Commissioner Ogden Reid's order, the hearings will be reconvened to consider appropriate remedies to clean up the Hudson River and implement the order, DEC spokesman Robert McManus said today.

PCB's are a toxic chemical, similar in structure to the now outlawed pesticide DDT, which is used by GE in the manufacture of capacitors at the company's two Washington County plants.

PCB's have caused liver cancer and reproductive failures in laboratory animals and some workers using the chemicals have complained of allergic reactions and skin diseases, according to federal officials. Last September, Reid said GE's discharge of an estimated 300,000 pounds of the toxic substance into the Hudson River since the 1940's may have done "irreparable damage" to the Hudson and urged the public not to eat any fish taken from the Hudson River.

Clearwater People's Pipewatch director John Harris-Cronin of Poughkeepsie is scheduled to testify before Congress Friday on the case history of PCB pollution of the Hudson River. Other individuals also slated to testify during the next two days are Congressman Ottinger, Dr. Joseph Highland of the Environmental Defense Fund, EPA general counsel Robert Zener, Gus Speth and Dr. Kareem Ahmed of the Natural Resources Defense Council and Lee Weddig, the executive director of the National Fisheries Institute. Just prior to the start of today's Congressional hearings, the Monsanto Company announced its plans to phase out the manufacture of PCB's.

"As soon as we are satisfied that the electrical power supply industry's needs are useable, acceptable alternate dielectric fluids have been met by whomever, Monsanto will voluntarily shut down its PCB manufacturing unit," Fitzgerald said.

"Monsanto has been working for a number of years on non-PCB replacement products," he said. "The problems we face are rooted in the unique fire resistant and dielectric characteristic of PCB's, and thei irreplaceable role they have played in electrical and industrial applications for the past 45 years."