15-12 CHEMICAL WEEK
WKLY. 63,000

SEP 29 1976

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PCB action widens

Last week a dozen residents of Alabama and Georgia filed a $500-million class-action suit against General Electric and Monsanto as a result of the closing of portions of rivers near Rome, Ga., to commercial fishing because of contamination by polychlorinated biphenyls. And in a separate development, the highest levels of PCBs ever discovered in U.S. shellfish—up to 53 parts per million—have been found in the Acushnet River, near New Bedford, Mass., during an Environmental Protection Agency survey.

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division, Dept. of Natural Resources, earlier this month closed the Coosa River and portions of the Oostanaula and Etowah rivers when unacceptably high levels of PCBs were found in fish. The Coosa flows into Lake Weiss on the Georgia-Alabama line. Georgia officials blamed poor "housekeeping" procedures at GE's transformer plant near Rome.

The suit charges that GE "has either willfully, wantonly, negligently or recklessly allowed and caused" the release of PCBs into streams flowing into the Coosa. Monsanto is named in the suit as the PCBs supplier.

New Bedford Incident: The findings at New Bedford are the result of the initial phase of EPA's nationwide search for PCB contamination. In addition to finding the material in shellfish, levels from 500 to 620,000 parts per billion were found in sediment. Cause of the contamination has not been determined. In early 1976 capacitor manufacturers Aerovox Corp. and Cornell-Dublier discontinued disposal of PCBs in New Bedford's municipal landfill and are storing wastes at their own facilities. EPA plans to test the city's wastewater treatment plant's incinerator for PCB emissions.

The Acushnet has been closed to shellfishing for several years because of high bacteria levels. The Food and Drug Administration's tolerance level for PCBs is 5 ppm.

MONS 051268