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PCB cleanup may spell trouble for die casters

By JACK THORNTON

CHICAGO—Hearings this week in Washington and lawsuits filed over the cost of cleaning up Waukegan, Ill.'s harbor spell trouble for some die casters.

The problem is polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), poisonous chemicals found in some types of hydraulic fluids that were used in high-pressure die casting machines until a few years ago.

The issues are how much die casters will have to spend to get PCBs out of their machines and, more important from a cost standpoint, who will pay for cleaning up what damage has already been done.

At the center of the dispute is Outboard Marine Corp. manufacturer of Johnson and Evinrude outboard motors with large die casting operations in Waukegan. A party to the case, though so far not sued, is Monsanto Chemical Corp., St. Louis, which supplied Outboard Marine with 8-million pounds of Pydraul from 1968 to 1971. Pydraul is a PCB-containing hydraulic fluid for die casting machines. Monsanto stopped manufacturing it in 1977, according to papers filed in the Waukegan case.

The PCBs get into the drains and subsequently into the harbor when hydraulic fluids leaked from the die casting machines. Leakage occurs in nearly every system that uses hydraulic fluids.

The die casters with the PCB problems are only those who used the PCB formulations of Monsanto Co., the only manufacturer of that type of phosphate ester hydraulic fluid.

According to Raleigh Garcia, former Pydraul product manager at Monsanto, Monsanto's competitors did not use PCBs. Garcia is now general sales manager for Chem-Trend Inc., Howell, Mich., which manufactures water-glycol fluids.

The potential costs of the clean-up are high. Based on draining, cleaning and refilling five of its own die casting machines, the company estimates the bill will be $8,000 per machine. Hugh B. Thomas, Outboard Marine's senior counsel, said that cleaning out two machines takes a week for five men on each of three full shifts. The company's die casting machines range from 400 to 1,600 tons, he said.

Similar costs were cited by General Motors Corp. in testimony before the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency a year ago, Thomas said. Those figures include hydraulic fluid at nearly $10 a gallon, solvent at over $2.50 a gallon and 57 cents a gallon in disposal costs.

Garcia at Chem-Trend said the GM and OMC clean-out figures appear high. Those are based on $8-a-gallon costs of fluids and not recycling. Chem-Trend's water glycols are about $4 a gallon, he said.

The machine cleanup standard is not yet law. It was first published as a proposed regulation in the Federal Register June 6. Thomas said the standard is a maximum of 50 parts per million (ppm) of PCBs in the hydraulic fluid or the machine's tubing and piping. GM's testimony was that its die casting machines typically had PCB levels of 100 to 500 ppm, Thomas said, while Outboard Marine's were typically 500 ppm.

He said he did not expect the standard to be altered by this week's hearings and, if not, for the 50 ppm limit to take effect in November.

The cost of cleaning up the Waukegan Harbor on Lake Michigan north of Chicago will run into the millions of dollars. Who will pay that bill is being litigated.

Ironically, this aspect of the litigation was started last March by Outboard Marine when it sued the Environmental Protection Agency after clean up negotiations broke down. A $300,000 harbor study, for which Outboard Marine paid, came to no conclusion, said Thomas.

The EPA countersued, demanding that Outboard Marine and not the government pay for both the cleanup and the research for a technology that has not been needed until now. Lastly, three weeks ago the Illinois EPA filed essentially the same complaint against Outboard Marine.

So far Monsanto, manufacturer of Pydraul, has not been sued. But Thomas said Outboard Marine's lawyers are holding discussions with the chemical company. He said Outboard Marine believes that Monsanto shares some responsibility.