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U.S. acts to halt Waukegan PCB influx

By Harlan Draeger

Emergency measures to prevent additional toxic PCBs from entering Lake Michigan at Waukegan were announced Friday by the federal government.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimated the program would cost $300,000 to $400,000.

Waukegan harbor is considered to have the largest concentration of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) anywhere on the Great Lakes.

Laboratory tests have linked PCBs, which build up in the fatty tissue of Lake Michigan fish, to a wide variety of health effects, including reproductive problems, cancer, liver damage, loss of hair and even death.

EPA and state officials say the toxic chemical was discharged from the Outboard Marine Corp. plant at Waukegan. Company officials report that they stopped using PCBs in hydraulic fluids at an old die-casting plant in 1971. But PCB residues remain on the bottom of the harbor and in nearby North Ditch.

JOHN McGUIRE, EPA regional administrator, said Friday that his agency will spend federal money on the emergency program, if necessary, under a special provision of the Clean Water Act.

FIRST, EPA has asked Outboard Marine to take steps to prevent heavy PCB discharges from North Ditch next spring. It expects a response next week.

"If they don't take the steps, we will do it with federal funds," McGuire said.

He called the new program a short-term, "Band-Aid approach" to prevent an estimated 400 to 450 pounds of PCBs from entering Lake Michigan next spring. "Anything over 15 to 20 pounds is a serious problem," the EPA official added.

McGuire said his agency is exploring the use of a culvert to divert stormwater and melted snow away from polluted sections of the drainage ditch.

THE EPA MOVE WAS called "a good step forward" by Brad Marion, assistant director of the Lake Michigan Federation, which has been pressing for a solution to the persistent PCB problem.

Marion said it was the first indication that EPA is willing to move ahead with technical solutions without waiting for the outcome of the lawsuits.

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