New challenge for the Project

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Sonoman testifies on

By JOHN LYNCH

The future of the PCB Project may well be at the crossroads.

Chambier Bechtel and Allen Simontacchi, Sonoma residents who established the grassroots Project back in 1980, believe that they have the fight of the lives on their hands in the wake of new proposed federal regulations on the use of PCBs, "regs" which the feel could ultimately break the Project's back.

"If you have no enforcement, then the regs aren't worth the paper they're printed on," remarked Simontacchi, a Sonoma PG&E lineman.

While it remains to be seen just what kind of a battle they're in for, Simontacchi and the Project couldn't have found a more appropriate arena in which to wage their struggle. This week, he and two other representatives of his union—the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1245—are in Washington, D.C., testifying at federal hearings on the proposed electrical equipment rule for highly toxic PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). Testimony heard at the week-long hearings, being held at the headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency at Waterside Mall, will influence just how the final regulations on PCBs will read. Simontacchi and Bechtel hope that their pleas will have an impact.

IN CRITICIZING EPA's proposed rule of the use of PCBs in "enclosed" electrical equipment (the proposed regulations appeared in the April 22, 1982 edition of the Federal Register), the Project leaders feel that, among other things:

—The proposed regulations do not adequately address, and in fact downplay the harmful effects of PCBs on navigable waterways, wildlife, fisheries, and worker and citizen safety;

—The findings on human health effects mentioned in the proposed regulations were based on industry-conducted studies;

—No consideration was taken for some 1300 health studies relating to PCB exposure which were submitted to Congress in a effort to ban PCBs and enact TSCA (1976 Toxic Substances Control Act);

—The proposed regulations "do not make any sense" in requiring just yearly inspections of transformers which contain 60,000 parts per million (six percent) PCBs when 50 ppm PCBs is still considered the "legal limit" The Project also believes that 50 ppm is still a dangerous level of contamination;

—The proposed regulations do not address the relationship between PCBs and its highly toxic by-products PCDFs (dibenzofurans) and PCDs (dibenzo-p-dioxins).

They also questioned the sincerity of the proposed 10-year phase out of large high voltage and large low voltage PCB capacitors (but not transformers).

Further, they were shocked at the regulations' seeming acceptance of the fact that thousands of pounds of PCBs will be discharged into the environment annually.

The Project, which orchestrated a petition drive here that eventually led to the adoption of a resolution by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors demanding stricter PCB controls by PG&E, also is requesting that the hearing be moved to California. They argue that adequate input should be permitted from this area, where PCBs have been the subject of much controversy.

BECHTEL VOWS that if the Project's input is not reflected in the adoption of the final PCB rule, the group will seek an injunction to "shut down the rule until the truth prevails."

While the IBEW Local 1245, of which Simontacchi is shop steward, made it possible for him to participate in the hearings, the local lineman emphasizes that he will really be representing the PCB Project and the citizens of California.

"Government always tries to pass this thing off as being a labor-management dispute," Simnontacchi explained. "But I say that our workplace is the environment.

"Government is taking industry's word for it and I think that's wrong. Industry has no credibility in this matter. It's insane."

INDEED, the tone of the most recent proposed regulations differs markedly from that contained in the May 1979 federal rule on PCBs, which outlined a number of adverse health effects associated with exposure to the chemical. A suspected carcinogen, PCBs are also believed to cause severe liver and other internal disorders, in addition to the more common skin disorders, such as chemical dermatitis and chloracne.

In fact the proposed regulations of Aril 22, 1982 refer to a study performed by a group of toxicologists hired by Edison Electrical Institute (a conglomerate of electrical utilities), which concludes that PCBs do not pose any serious health risk of injury to human health.

The report, written by Drill, Friess, Hays, Loomis and Shaffer, Inc. and submitted by the EEI and Utilities Solid Waste Advisory Group, states: "From present evidence, no firm associations can be made between PCB exposure and any other human health effects, even after long-term occupational exposure."

That study even discounted the Yusho, Japan incident of 1968 when at least 1000 persons became severely ill after eating rice oil contaminated with PCBs. Evidence suggests that there was an increase in the rate of stomach and liver cancer among those victims.

"...Yusho cannot be considered a model to reflect the possible effects of PCB exposure to man," the report read. A copy of that report was made available to Pacific Gas and Electric Company's PCB Task Force and PCB Guidance Committee last month. The company declined comment when asked about the report.

ANOTHER concern of the Project is that the proposed regulations fail to acknowledge the link between PCBs and their suspected toxic by-products —dibenzofurans and dibenzodioxins. Bechtel has long contended that PCBs can at certain temperatures emit the nearly as dangerous furans and much more hazardous dioxins.

Those contaminants turned up in a $24 million fire involving a large PCB transformer that destroyed a government building recently in New York, forcing the permanent closure of the complex. "The absolutely most shocking aspect of those regs is that they did not address this connection," Bechtel said.

Although Monsanto Corporation "voluntarily" stopped manufacturing PCBs in 1979, and while the recently proposed regs do call for a 10-year, $700 million phase-out of large PCB capacitors, the question nevertheless lingers in Bechtel's mind: where will it (PCBs) all go?

PCBs do not break down naturally in the environment and instead tend to bioaccumulate in the food chain. "It doesn't dissipate. Where will it all go?" she asked.

THE PROJECT is not alone in this struggle. According to a member of the EPA's PCB Regulations Team in Washington, D.C., the National Resources Defense Council and the Environmental Defense Fund are scheduled to have representatives at the hearings this week. Both have campaigned for tougher PCB laws.

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