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THE GENERAL ELECTRIC COMPANY HAS BEEN CHARGED WITH CAUSING "SERIOUS, IF NOT IRREPARABLE" DAMAGE to the Hudson River by discharging the "toxic and deleterious substance," polychlorinated biphenyl, from its two upstate plants for more than 20 years. Announcing New York State's intention to seek an abatement order that would force G.E.'s Hudson Falls and Fort Edward plants to reduce their discharge of the chemical from five to two pounds a day by December and end the dumping completely by September 30, 1976, Environmental Commissioner Ogden R. Reid said the discharges were "a hazard to human health and the natural resources of New York State, likely to cause irreparable damage to the Hudson and likely to result in substantial injury to the river's commercial and recreational fisheries."

The order followed last month's disclosure that striped bass and large-mouth bass taken from the river and salmon from Lake Ontario were contaminated by concentrations of the chemical far beyond those considered safe by federal standards. The earlier advisory warning the public not to eat the fish was further extended by Mr. Reid to include small-mouth bass, white perch, white suckers and eel from the Hudson and lake trout and brown trout from Lake Ontario. PCB's, like DDT, accumulate in the fatty tissues of the body and are known to have some 18 toxic effects. Ingested in sufficient quantities, they have caused death in humans, skin disease, miscarriages and stillbirths. In laboratory animals their actions produce liver damage and massive reproductive failures while recent unpublished studies, according to Dr. Theodore Cooper, Assistant Secretary of Health, in the Health, Education and Welfare Department, confirm that they cause cancer in rats. The Environmental Protection Agency has been asked by HEW to prevent industry discharge of PCB's into waters where contamination of food fish might occur.

The State contends that although G.E. has a federal permit to discharge PCB, used in the manufacture of capacitors and transformers, the company was violating state water quality standards and creating grave health hazards. The Department of Environmental Conservation has asked G.E. to post a $2-million bond forfeitable if the deadline of the discharge order is not met, and is asking civil penalties of an undetermined amount to help restore the river. An administrative hearing where a judgment would be made has been set for October 6 but G.E. has indicated its willingness to fight an unfavorable action in the courts. A spokesman for the company said that it would be "a breach of integrity to make a commitment to achieve 'zero discharge' by a certain date because at this point in time, we know of no feasible method of achieving such a goal," but is willing to commit itself "to a goal of three-quarters of a pound of discharge a day by the end of 1976." But, Mr. Reid said, "the chief issue here is how do we restore the health of a great river and eliminate the health hazard to the people of New York State."

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