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GE Is Accused By U.S. Agency Of PCB Hazards

OSHA Alleges Concern Put Employes at Risk at Two Plants in New York State

A WALL STREET JOURNAL *News Roundup*

General Electric Co. committed eight violations of federal health standards in exposing employes at two plants to potentially dangerous levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, according to a report by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The report said the violations occurred at GE's Fort Edward and Hudson Falls capacitor facilities in upstate New York. GE has used the chemicals, known as PCBs, since the late 1940s as insulating fluids in capacitors. The company has been under attack from the State Department of Environmental Conservation for polluting the Hudson River with the chemicals.

The eight citations mean that the company is subject to a total of $1,800 in fines, a GE spokesman said.

According to OSHA findings, the GE plants contained concentrations of airborne PCBs averaging about twice the federal limit, classified by the agency as a "serious" violation that could cause death or considerable physical harm. Furthermore, the company was cited for breaking protective-equipment standards by letting employes who work with the chemicals use a cream rather than gloves for protection.

Skin Ailments Noted

During hearings on GE's responsibility for polluting the river, the company acknowledged that at least 65 employes at the plants had suffered skin ailments during the past 15 years, possibly because of exposure to PCBs.

In response to the report, GE said it has undertaken modifications that include redirection of airflow and shielding of work stations from PCB sources that have reduced vapor levels significantly. It added that late last year, additional ventilating and equipment changes were designed and the required equipment ordered.

GE said the equipment won't be delivered until at least July, but when it is installed PCB vapor levels will be brought well below prescribed limits.

The company added that it had required employes to wear gloves or a cream when handling PCBs, though now, in light of OSHA not recognizing the cream as sufficient protection, it is requiring that gloves be worn.

GE Files Brief

In a related development, GE filed a legal brief arguing that it shouldn't have to pay the recommended $7.1 million penalty for polluting the Hudson River.

Last month, the Environmental Conservation Department had filed papers seeking the penalty, to cover part of the cost of removing and treating the estimated 1.5 million cubic yards of polluted sediment.

GE said in its brief that it considers the penalty unfair because it believes the state has also been responsible for the pollution. GE said that new treatment, control and monitoring facilities have cut the discharge from its plants to below the current standard.

The company said it's willing to spend up to $4 million to build a treatment plant to further reduce the discharge.

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