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PCB 'laxity' dismaying

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Three area conservation organizations have expressed "dismay" over what they say is a lack of action by two federal agencies in dealing with polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) pollution in the Hudson River.

The Federated Conservationists of Westchester, the Hudson River Fisherman's Association and the Hudson River Sloop Restoration said they believe there has been a lack of action taken by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration.

Anne Donaldson, executive director of the federated conservationists, said the three groups want the two federal agencies to move "to control PCBs and other toxic substances that have no business being in our environment."

PCBs are liquids used for insulating in flouresecent lights and transformers. They were developed in the 1930s and have been used widely in the electronic products industry.

IN THE LATE 1960s, however, PCBs came under fire. They have been linked to causing liver cancer and other ailments in test animals. Laws now require that they be used only in permanently sealed devices.

Most of the PCB chemicals found in the Hudson are believed to originate at two General Electric Co. plants north of Albany.

The company has used the substances in its manufacturing for many years. Last year it was granted a permit to discharge up to 30 pounds of PCBs per day into the river.

Tests conducted on fish caught in the river last summer, however, found that they contained levels of the substances in excess of the five parts per million level considered safe by the Food and Drug Administration if the fish are to be consumed by humans.

Following the disclosure, State Conservation Commissioner Ogden Reid ordered General Electric to cease discharging PCBs by next September. The federal permit had ordered the company to cut its discharge to 0.2 pounds per day after May, 1977.

SINCE THEN, hearings have been held at which the issue has been discussed. A decision by hearing officer Abraham Sofaer is expected later this month regarding whether or not the Reid order will stand.

General Electric said it currently is discharging under three pounds of PCB per day. A company spokesman said the firm does not believe the level can be brought to zero in the time span Reid is suggesting. He added, however, that substitute chemicals are being considered.

Mrs. Donaldson, executive director of the federated conservationists, said the trio of environmental groups are strongly in favor of the zero discharge level being imposed. She labeled past failure of the state to regulate PCB pollution "criminal," and the current lack of federal action "a failure of government."

The conservation organizations noted that at times the level of PCBs enetering the river from General Electric has been 116 pounds per day. Reid's office said this level has been reached when heavy rains cause runoff from the grounds of the plants which, the office added, are saturated with the chemicals from years of manufacturing.

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