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Waukegan

PCBs may halt harbor plans

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Waukegan's proposed $4 million marina may be beached before it's built.

The Lake Michigan harbor improvement project could be stalled because of a high concentration of toxic PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) found at the bottom of the harbor.

The PCBs were discovered two years ago, but still remain a problem because neither marina engineers, environmentalists nor federal judges can decide who is responsible for the cleanup.

Environmentalists believe the controversy could last for several more years until certain questions are answered.

Besides the question of who is responsible for the clean-up, no one has yet determined if the contaminated sediments can be removed without further damage to Lake Michigan. Also, there is the consideration of how much removal would cost.

These questions might be resolved by the outcome of three lawsuits filed in Federal District Court earlier this year.

The Outboard Marine Corporation, which has admitted to discharging PCBs over an 18-year period, has sued the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), asking that the extent of contamination be studied.

The EPA has responded with a countersuit demanding that Outboard Marine Corp. perform the research and, if possible, remove the contaminated sediment.

The Illinois Attorney General's office has filed a similar suit against Outboard Marine Corp.

Despite the controversy, some Waukegan officials contend the harbor expansion project can continue as planned.

"That problem won't seriously affect the new harbor project," Mayor William Morris explained, "because the PCBs are in the old harbor, which is nearly two blocks away from where the new harbor would be built."

The attorney general's office has retained a consultant to study the proposed harbor and a full report is expected within 90 days. After the study is completed, construction can begin, the mayor claimed.

The Illinois state legislature already has approved a $4 million appropriations bill for the project. The proposal includes extension of an existing breakwater wall and harbor area and the addition of 800 to 1,000 mooring spaces.

Waukegan, located 36 miles north of Chicago, presently has a small harbor capable of accommodating up to 200 boats.

A spokesman for Outboard Marine Corp. said the PCB problem started in 1960 when the company began buying a hydraulic fluid called Pydraul from the Monsanto Chemical Co.

Monsanto, the spokesman said, never informed Outboard Marine that the PCBs were a major ingredient of the fluid which was being used in the hydraulic systems of high pressure die casting machines.

Company officials said they were not aware they had been using PCBs until the EPA conducted tests in February, 1976.

Reports show that the PCBs are locked into the sediment and are "largely out of the environment," causing some Outboard Marine officials to maintain that the PCBs are no threat to the harbor.

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