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GE Tells Of Possible PCB Reactions

By Richard S. Davis

ALBANY, N.Y. -- The General Electric Co. has indicated that 65 employees became ill over a 15-year period under conditions that "may have been caused or aggravated by exposure to PCB," polychlorinated biphenyls, the controversial chemical used in the production of large-sized capacitors.

GE made the disclosure in testimony that became public in a hearing before the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to decide if that agency should order GE plants to cease discharging PCB into the Hudson River.

The company said that 49 of the approximately 1800 workers who worked near PCB reported to dispensaries complaining of allergic dermatitis. Sixteen others complained of nausea, dizziness, eye irritation, nasal irritation, asthmatic bronchitis or fungus.

The federal government's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has also been considering regulating more severely the use of PCB (EBN, Aug. 4). In written testimony, submitted in June to EPA by Dr. Edward L. Simons, a GE official in charge of environmental problems, the company said, "the only medical effects that had been reported during the 4 decades we were in this business have been occasional cases of chloracne or other minor skin irritations of a nonchronic nature which disappeared upon the transfer of the employee to some other operation."

In explaining the apparent contradiction in GE's state testimony that 65 workers became ill and the federal testimony that there were only occasional cases of chloracne, Dr. Simons, writing to EPA chief Russell Train, said that he had checked with the GE medical director at the Pittsfield plant who told him that in their 40-year history the only medical reports GE had were of chloracne and other infrequent, nonchronic disorders which disappeared when the employee was transferred.

Dr. Simons said that he checked back with the medical director who maintained his statements are still true, and that chloracne is a more severe affliction than the dermatitis mentioned in the New York DEC testimony. DEC had asked for the records of every employee who reported to the dispensary, and GE's medical director said that both chloracne and dermatitis are minor skin irritations.

Dr. Simon emphasized that all of the 65 employees who were mentioned in the state testimony complained of infrequent, nonchronic ailments, and that only one of the 65 employees lost time at work and that was only 5 days.

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