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GE will end use of PCB here by '77

By Kirk Scharfenberg

The General Electric Co. yesterday informed the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that it intends to terminate the use of the toxic substance PCB in new products manufactured in Pittsfield by Dec. 31, 1977.

The commitment by GE, the nation's largest manufacturer of electrical equipment — the only manufacturing process in which PCB is now used — indicates for the first time that the application of the substance in industry, widespread since 1929, is in fact nearing its end.

But while the termination of PCB use would end the possibility of any new discharges into the Housatonic River, it will not end the discharge of residual amounts of the substance — built up in pipes, drains and the soil during 47 years of use — into the river.

And despite objections from the company that it cannot meet proposed discharge standards aimed at limiting the release of residual PCB to ten parts per billion by July 1, 1977, an EPA engineer in Boston said this morning the agency will "probably" issue a permit setting that limit within the next six weeks. The company could appeal that decision administratively within EPA and eventually in court.

The EPA engineer, Bernard Sacks, also said even tougher standards — one part per billion — will probably be imposed on Sprague Electric Co. discharges of PCB into the Hoosic River in North Adams, despite objections from Sprague officials that it cannot be met.

While GE has previously pledged to phase out the use of PCB here, it has never before set a deadline for that action, asserting that no suitable substitute for the substance — used as an insulating fluid in transformers — had been developed.

A company spokesman said this morning that a satisfactory substitute has still not been developed but added the company was confident one would be available for use in transformers by the end of 1977. PCB is used in insulating fluid — the product used locally is known by the trade name Pyranol — because it not only provides the necessary insulation but is fire resistant. It is thus placed in transformers slated for use in heavily populated areas in order to reduce the risk of fire.

The development of an adequate substitute for use in transformers had been considered especially difficult because temperatures approaching the flash-point are frequently reached within transformers.

PCB has been found to cause failures in the reproductive systems of fish, cancer in laboratory animals and deforming skin diseases in humans. Like DDT, it builds up into higher concentrations as it is passed up along the food chain.

Spurred by the discovery of high concentrations of PCB in fish in the Hudson River — PCB believed to have come from GE capacitor plants north of Albany, N.Y. — a major nationwide study of PCB pollution has found the substance to be spread widely throughout the environment. In the Housatonic, fish samples tested by the EPA have found concentrations up to seven times the health standards established by the federal Food and Drug Administration.

Locally, GE has been using a high-intensity incinerator to burn up Pyranol spilled during the manufacture of transformers since 1972 and the company maintains therefore that its discharge of new PCB has been reduced to virtually zero. However, the company has acknowledged that about one-quarter pound of residual PCB, from drains, pipes and soil, is reaching the Housatonic daily.

The proposed EPA discharge permit would reduce that to 1.6 ounces a day.

In a letter received by the EPA yesterday, Pittsfield GE relations and utilities manager Richard L. Reinhart, while announcing the GE decision to eliminate PCB from its production process by the end of 1977, said, "The technology is not now available to dispose of the residual problem to meet the new discharge limits." Similar objections were voiced by Sprague officials, according to EPA engineer Sacks.

Sacks, responsible for drafting the proposed new discharge permits regulating PCB, did not dispute the GE and Sprague contentions. However, he added, "I get it from the other way. Our (national) administrator, Russell Train, has said he wants PCB discharges reduced and eliminated. I'm working from both sides and I'm in the middle."

The GE and Sprague assessments were received on the last day of the comment period which followed Sacks' release of the proposed new discharge permits in April. Neither company asked for a public hearing on the matter, Sacks said, and no decision has been made on whether to schedule such a hearing, a procedure permitted by EPA regulation.

Besides GE and Sprague, no other organizations or individuals commented on Sacks' proposed new discharge limits. "It would have made me feel good if someone had come out and said, 'Hey, that's a good permit,' but nobody did," Sacks said. "People in favor never come out."

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