9/11

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Efforts to eliminate PCBs impress federal official

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PITTSFIELD — The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officer for the New England region said Wednesday he was impressed with progress General Electric in Pittsfield has made in eliminating polychlorinated biphenil (PCBs) from its plant and vicinity.

William Sarro had visited GE July 10 for a progress check on company compliance with the Storage and Marking regulations of the EPA guidelines pertaining to the eradication of the highly pollutant PCBs.

He returned this week to confer with James Thayer, environmental engineer for the local facilities, and made a partial report. A written report which will be sent within a short time, a spokesman said..

The local GE plant has spent $4 million to eliminate plant pollution since 1969 when the seriousness of PCB contamination became known, plant spokesmen have said. Sarro told The Morning Union Wednesday that General Electric had one of the better programs in New England.

The EPA official said GE was in compliance with the Toxic Substance Control Act, which ruled this year that the allowable parts per million of PCB contamination was 50 parts per million, up 10-fold from the previous maximum.

The immediate goal of the company is to receive approval of its incinerator operation to eliminate PCBs from oil and machinery or containers that had become contaminated. Thayer said "It's nice to know we are doing what we should."

GE's program has been so successful, Jack Batty, company spokesman, said, "We have received many requests from other firms to treat PCB contaminated material here, but have refused because of the possibility of spills." Batty also said that the company is prepared to spend an additional $9 to $ 10 million to wipe out all traces of discharge from the plant."

Sarro said that some transformers still in use at the local GE plant contain the fire retardent material containing the PCBs, but as they are de-activated they are drained and flushed and the residuals from these and other sources are packed in drums and shipped to an approved landfill area. There are only six such landfills in the country, the nearest being in Niagara Falls, N.Y.

The plant clean-up, Sarro said, doesn't help stream contamination. Seepage from the local plants has produced a high concentration of the deadly PCBs in the Housatonic River, which will not be eliminated for many years.

General Electric, he noted, is only one of the many source points of such pollution in the nation, many other firms having used the Monsanto Chemical product (no longer produced) in various other operations.

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