The Boston Globe
(MORNING)
D. 261,042 SUN. 566,377

SEP 15 1976

In New Bedford

High level of PCB's in river

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Cancer-causing chemicals at levels from 4 to 10 times above what is allowed in food have been found in clams dug from the Acushnet River in New Bedford, Federal authorities disclosed yesterday in Boston.

While extent of the contamination is not yet fully known, Massachusetts officials said the clam flats where the high concentrations were found were already closed to shellfishing because of high bacterial pollution.

The chemicals, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), are used as a fire-resistant insulator in electrical equipment. They apparently got into the river and New Bedford Harbor from operations by two capacitor manufacturers in the city.

General Electric, which last week agreed to pay New York $4 million for polluting the Hudson River, has said it will stop using PCBs nationwide by the end of 1977. Monsanto Corp., the only maker of the compounds, also plans to end production by 1978. Monsanto, Dow Chemical and GE are now marketing a substitute product.

Simultaneous with the EPA disclosures about New Bedford, state Environmental Affairs Secretary Evelyn F. Murphy said a task force would be established to determine the economic and environmental impact on the city. Its first meeting will be tomorrow.

Aerovox employs about 500 persons in its riverfront plant and Cornell-Dublier about 300 at a site inland. The Cornell-Dublier plant discharges its pretreated industrial wastes into the New Bedford sewer system, where some evidence of PCBs also has been found.

McGlennon and Murphy said in a joint press release that 600,000 pounds of PCBs that accumulated in New Bedford landfill the 30 years that the companies have been in business also presents a potential problem.

While no evidence has been found so far that the compounds have affected drinking water supplies, "we have to determine ... what steps should be taken to control or eliminate this damage potential," McGlennon said.

Officials of the manufacturers, Aerovox Corp. and Cornell-Dublier Co., which together employ about 800 persons, declined comment on the report yesterday by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) office in Boston. They said they had not seen the report.

John A. S. McGlennon, EPA administrator in Boston, said PCB levels ranged from 21 to 53 parts per million in three soft-shell clam samples — the high figure the greatest discovered in any shellfish sample in the nation.

Maximum PCB tolerance allowed by the US Food and Drug Administration in food for human consumption is five parts per million.

McGlennon said sediment from the Acushnet River also showed high PCB levels, reaching upward of 600 parts per million. The PCB levels at the bottom of New Bedford Harbor measured up to 140 parts per million.

Samples of fish from the river and harbor have been sent to EPA laboratories in Duluth, Minn., for separate analysis. Officials at the Massachusetts Department of Marine Fisheries said that until those results are learned they would take no action concerning fishing there.

MONS 037206