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PCBs may yield to bacteria

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — The state Department of Environmental Conservation is following closely research by a Canadian scientist who has discovered a strain of bacteria that feeds on PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls.

The department hopes that the research may someday help eliminate some industrial waste pollution. However, a department spokesman noted that is not yet known whether the bacteria could ever be used on a mass scale to eliminate such widespread pollution as in the Hudson River.

The announcement of the research came earlier this week as the state announced new hearings in its dispute with the General Electric Co. over pollution of the Hudson.

GE uses PCBs in the manufacture of capacitors and discharges the toxic chemical into the Hudson from its plants in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward.

"We're still looking at the discovery to see if it could work at GE," a spokesman for the state said. "But at this point, there isn't enough data to show whether it would apply to our situation."

Dr. Dickson Liu, a scientist at the Canada Centre for INLAND Waters in Burlington, Ont., had announced his new technique earlier this month. Ultrasonic vibrators are utilized in his process to disperse PCBs into fine particles, which can then be devoured by the [illegible] of bacteria.

Recent state hearings concluded that GE was in violation of two sections of state law for dumping the pollutant in dangerous amounts into the river. But Hearing Examiner Abraham Sofaer was also highly critical of state and federal officials for lagging in attacking the problem.

A state researcher said Liu's technique, thus far, is limited to small areas. The researcher noted that it would take an enormous amount of energy to create ultrasonic vibrations throughout the Hudson River. Without the vibrations, the PCBs would not be broken up, rendering the bacteria ineffective, he said.

The Canadian experts say the value of the technique "is likely to be in the treatment of PCB-rich industrial wastes" and concede it may never be adapted to produce results in the environment.

Liu is beginning a one-year test of the technique on industrial waste. Both GE and the department plan to study the results.

The new state hearings on the PCB controversy will begin April 5. The purpose of the hearings is to determine what penalties should be imposed on GE.

PCBs are manmade organic chemicals which persist indefinitely in the environment and are known to cause serious ailments, such as cancer, in some animals.

Their impact on humans is not yet known, however, the state considers them a threat to humans as well as animals and has banned commerical fishing in the Hudson and warned against eating fish taken from the river.

Medical tests are being done this week on workers at the two upstate plants to determine whether exposure to the PCBs has harmed them. GE has said that previous tests on the workers showed that a number contracted skin ailments.

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