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Sauter quizzed on Westinghouse PCB dumping

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Westinghouse Division Manager Donald M. Sauter, whose lawyer inadvertantly called him "Mr. Westinghouse" during the current hearings about PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) pollution, seemed to be just that Friday, spending nearly all day in the witness chair as the sole visible spokesman for his firm.

Sauter was quizzed by a battery of attorneys who tried to determine what he had known about (1) early evidence of PCB contamination in Westinghouse plant effluents, (2) landfill disposal of PCB-contaminated solid wastes from the plant and (3) early warnings about the health dangers of PCBs.

The hearings are being conducted by the State Environmental Management Board to determine how alleged PCB pollution from the factory can be stopped, whether Westinghouse should be held responsible for cleanup of residual PCBs, and whether the firm should pay damages to persons whose health and property may have been harmed by the cancer-causing chemical. The Bloomington plant has used the PCBs for years in the manufacture of capacitors for the electrical industry.

Sauter told Bloomington City Attorney Steve Richardson that he had known as early as 1970 about the flow of PCB-tainted waste water into the city's sewer system. He said Westinghouse had taken effluent test samples and tested fish in 1971, and found traces of PCBs, but said he did not know the level of contamination.

Monroe County Prosecutor Barry Brown asked whether county or state health authorities had been alerted about the test results at the time.

"No," Sauter replied.

There was no public knowledge of PCB contamination in Bloomington's sewer system until last spring.

Sauter also said he had never seen the record of an agreement between Westinghouse and Monsanto Corporation, sole U.S. manufacturer of PCBs, in which Monsanto asked to be held not liable for any harmful consequences which might result after its sale of PCBs to the Bloomington Westinghouse facility. Monsanto voluntarily began phasing out its PCB

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production and sale in 1971, and for a time sold them only for use in "closed" systems such as capacitors.

When he became aware of the environmental hazards of PCBs, Sauter said, he began research and development efforts aimed at finding a satisfactory substitute for the PCB compounds, and new methods of capacitor-making which would not allow PCBs to escape into the environment.

The only other witness to take the stand was Michael M. Phillips, an employe of the Utilities Service Board, who testified that during 1974 and 1975, he allowed farmers and gardeners to haul sewage sludge away from the Winston Thomas sewage treatment plant for use as fertilizer and soil conditioner.

Not suspecting the presence of PCBs in the sludge, he assured users that it was reasonably safe for these purposes, Phillips recounted.

An organic gardener Phillips specifically recalled was Ron Nehrig of Smithville, who applied large quantities of sludge to a garden which was his and a pasture where his dairy cow grazed, and since discovery of the PCBs has had to give up the garden and cow as food producers. Nehrig is one of several private individuals involved in suits against Westinghouse over damage to their property.

Joseph Karen, hearing officer, announced that the hearing will resume next Wednesday at 9:30 a.m. instead of Monday as was originally scheduled. Attorney Guy Loftman protested the delay and said the logical continuity of the hearings will be upset by the change. Local witnesses had been expected to testify Monday, with out-of-state health and environment specialists to appear later next week.

"The in-state witnesses should have a chance to be heard first," Loftman argued, "so that the specialists can get a real assessment of our situation here."

The place of the hearing was also changed; it will be moved from St. Paul's Catholic Center to the Unitarian Universalist Church, 2220 N. Fee Lane.

Friday's full day of testimony came to a close only when, to the relief of weary participants, the court reporter announced that her transcribing machine was about to run out of paper.

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