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New Bedford firms advised

EPA sets new limits on discharged toxins

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The U.S. Environmental Agency has issued discharge permits to two New Bedford firms restricting the amount of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCBs) the companies can discharge in an effort to reduce the chemical's concentration in discharges to the Acushnet River.

The EPA's regional office in Boston this week announced it had issued Aerovox Industries, Inc., and Cornell Dubilier Electric Corp. discharge permits that will require a reduction in PCBs entering harbor waters.

Under the permits, Cornell Dubilier would be limited to a discharge of two-tenths of one ounce per day in a concentration not to exceed 10 parts per billion. The permit is effective immediately.

Aerovox would be limited to two-thirds of an ounce daily, also in a concentration not to exceed 10 parts per billion. The Aerovox permit would be effective on July 1.

A spokesman at Aerovox said the firm is willing to meet the permit limitations, while at Cornell Dubilier, a spokesman there said the company is studying the matter before making a decision.

George Alexander, industrial relations manager at Cornell Dubilier, said "we don't know yet what we'll do. "We just received word this morning (Thursday) and we haven't looked over the matter yet."

Alexander said that if the firm is dissatisfied with the permit limitations it has the right under the law to appeal to an administrative law judge.

Clifford A. Tuttle, president of Aerovox, said his firm finds the discharge limits acceptable. "We have been working very hard to restrict any effects on the environment," he said.

Tuttle said the amount of PCBs to be discharged under the new permit would be miniscule.

Previous discharge permits issued to the two companies did not set limits on the amount of PCBs that could be discharged. Tests by the EPA on PCBs last year indicated that up to 0.7 ounces daily was being discharged by Cornell and up to 0.9 ounces daily was coming from Aerovox.

PCBs are similar in structure to the pesticide DDT. Fire resistant and slow to break down in the environment, PCBs have been used in the manufacture of transformers and capacitors because of their non-conductivity and resistance to heat and explosion.

Once thought to be relatively harmless compounds, they have since been found to be harmful to humans. Adverse effects have included skin and neurological disorders in humans and evidence of reproductive failures and cancer links in test animals.

Monsanto, the only U.S. manufacturer of PCBs intends to completely phase out its production of the chemicals by the end of this year.

The controversy over PCBs came in sharp focus in November of 1976 when EPA Administrator Russell Train said the compounds "are present in our environment to a far greater degree and at higher levels than we previously thought."

The two New Bedford firms were among 19 plants in the United States which were discharging the chemicals into waterways. Later tests showed PCB concentrations in shellfish taken from the Acushnet River to be "the highest" found in the United States and that sediment samples also had concentrations among the highest.

In addition to the two New Bedford firms, the EPA intends to issue discharge permits to two other Massachusetts companies, the General Electric Co. plant in Pittsfield, and the Sprague Electric Co. in North Adams. Those permits are expected to be issued in February.