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2 firms hit by $1 billion suit

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Coosa River fishermen, property and store owners who depend on the river for sport and their livelihood, Wednesday filed a $1 billion lawsuit against General Electric Co. and Monsanto Corp., charging that pollution from a GE plant near Rome, Ga., into the Coosa has ruined their businesses.

Filed in Birmingham Federal District Court, the class action suit was filed by 21 people on behalf of more than 3,000 others in northeast Alabama who either "look to Weiss Lake on the Coosa "directly or indirectly for their livelihood."

The $1 billion in damages is the largest amount ever requested in the Alabama federal court, according to a spokesman in the U.S. District Clerk's office.

Plaintiffs named in the suit were Travis Chandler, Bill Coffey, Kenneth Mackey, Fred Ulrich, Pruitt's Fish Camp, H.W. Rosie Smith, Dick Young, H.D. Hampton, William R. Ransum, Asa Allred, a commercial fisherman, Philip Powell, R.L. Guice, Randy Odam, Tom Horton, a fish and tackle shop owner from Cedar Bluff, All Outdoor Inc., William T. Rowland, Grady McBride, Frank S. Barber, and Alabama Bass Chapter Federation.

In September, the Coosa River was closed in Georgia from Rome to the state line after the Georgia Department of Natural Resources found high concentrations of a chemical called PCB, polychlorinated biphenyls, in the fish.

THE THICK, oily chemical, used in the manufacture of electrical transformers, was leaking into the river from a GE disposal site according to government officials.

The amounts of PCBs found in the fish from Rome to Weiss Lake far exceeded the five parts per million limit set by the the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, according to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials.

In laboratory tests, EPA found that PCBs cause cancer in mice, according to EPA.

Although commerical fishing was banned in Georgia, it was not banned in Alabama. However, in November, the Alabama Water Improvement Commission issued a warning not to eat Weiss Lake fish, followed by a similar warning from EPA.

The PCB scare turned normally busy fish camps, campgrounds, sport and fishing related businesses at the lake into ghost towns at Cedar Bluff and Centre in northeast Alabama.

The plaintiffs claim they have lost "large sums of money as a result" of the PCB contamination of fish.

ALTHOUGH THE PCBs come from the GE plant, Monsanto was named in the suit because it is the sole manufacturer of the chemical.

The suit charges that Monsanto knew of the danger of PCBs, but failed to explain proper handling procedures to GE, beyond a warning to avoid spills or vaporization of the chemical into the environment.

Even though the contract between GE and Monsanto states that GE must prevent the chemical from entering the environment, the suit claims that GE discharged the PCBs anyway, "without regard to human life or fish life, and the effect it would have on lake and river property."

Last fall, a group filed a $500 illion suit against GE in connection with the PCB incident in Georgia.

Following that suit, GE concreted the area in which it had been dumping the PCB. GE officials said that stopped the runoff of PCBs into the Coosa, and that they planned to stop all use of PCB's by June.