PCB Poison

The interim report of a hearing examiner, which Governor Carey had sought to sidetrack, has confirmed in grim detail warnings by Environmental Conservation Commissioner Ogden R. Reid that the discharge into the Hudson River of toxic PCB's from two General Electric Company plants north of Albany poses a grave public health menace.

The examiner found "overwhelming" evidence that G.E. has violated the state's anti-pollution laws. Just one passage from his 77-page documentation should be sufficient to convince any New Yorker that this environmental threat is too serious to be brushed aside for short-term economic or other considerations. It reads:

"A single, 200-gram (6.4-ounce) meal of eel captured . . . at Stillwater and found to contain 559.25 parts per million of PCB's in its edible parts would contaminate an adult with over 50 percent of the Food and Drug Administration's estimated lifetime limit, and a child with 200 percent of its allowable lifetime exposure."

The interim report does not attempt to prescribe remedies for this alarming situation, which stems from an accumulated long-term contamination of lengthy stretches of the Hudson River. But there can be no blinking the danger that the contamination could be aggravated and prolonged by a company proposal—supported by Governor Carey and Commerce Commissioner John S. Dyson—to continue PCB discharges indefinitely at sharply reduced levels in accordance with current Federal standards. These Federal standards, incidentally, are being reviewed and may themselves be influenced by the New York report.

The examiner—Prof. Abraham D. Sofaer of Columbia Law School—has announced his intention of conducting further hearings on the practicality of Commissioner Reid's call for a total ban on PCB discharges and for action by G.E. to rectify the damage it has already done. That is the prescribed legal procedure for settling these difficult issues; it also offers the most reasonable way to try to "strike a balance" between the requirements of industry and the environment, thus protecting the legitimate interests of both, an avowed goal of Governor Carey's new economic policy. The Governor and his aides, including Commissioner Dyson, have a duty to give the renewed Sofaer hearings their unqualified support.

MONS 031670