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EPA official discusses PCB's

McGlennon apologizes to local officials

by JOHN HARWOOD

An apology to Dartmouth officials was offered last week by John McGlennon, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in New England.

He replied to criticism from Supt. Manuel Branco and Leonard Landry of the Department of Public Works, who had noted the town's water division was not notified when the town wells were sampled recently.

The first local outcry came when the possible presence of a hazardous chemical, PCB's, in the town's water supply was announced by the EPA Boston office with no contact made with local officials. PCB stands for polychlorinated byphenyls.

"I apologize to anyone who was offended," Mr. McGlennon said, during a telephone conference call last Monday with several southeastern Massachusetts newspapers.

He said the agency "moved as quickly as it could to identify the (PCB) sources."

Dartmouth officials would be notified when the test results were complete in April, he assured.

At the same time, he said he was "very sensitive to the adverse publicity" the area manufacturers who are sources of PCB's might get.

The reason Dartmouth's water is being tested is that Aerovox and Cornell Dubilier of New Bedford use an electrical insulating fluid containing PCB's.

"At no time have they been uncooperative," he reported. Any "embarrassment" that may have been caused is "unwarranted," he added; they have committed "no violations."

Dartmouth is one of six New England communities including New Bedford being studied by the agency for possible hazardous PCB contamination.

Aerovox recently tested the Paskamanset River and found its PCB level too far below the hazard level set by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration standard.

As an indication of how serious the agency takes the potential PCB contamination, Mr. McGlennon listed PCB's as number two, only after the potential onshore and offshore impact of Georges Bank oil and gas drilling, among the "critical issues for Southeastern Massachusetts." The third issue was water quality.

While the PCB impact on New England is being studied, Mr. McGlennon did say they were "not dangerous" to Massachusetts fish.

Noting, "I am a bass fisherman myself, he said offshore fish have been sampled because they migrate from the Hudson River, where PCB levels are high.

Despite the seriousness of the potential problem, Mr. McGlennon said no "ban" was planned.

However, he did say the agency would "move as expeditiously as we can to prohibit PCB discharges."

In addition, they will study the feasibility of "eliminating" sources of PCB pollution, such as the New Bedford landfill, where the two city firms have dumped their industrial wastes for 30 years.

Aerovox checked the Paskamanset River, because its headwaters are near the city's landfill northwest of Hathaway Rd. and Rt. 140.

With disposal of PCB's a problem for the two manufacturers, Cornell Dubilier wrote to the State Department of Environmental Quality Engineering recently seeking the location of an approved PCB dumping site in Massachusetts.

However, Com. David Standley replied no such site exists, the nearest is in New York or New Jersey and a licensed hazardous waste hauler should be used to transfer the PCB wastes.

The state is working on selecting a disposal site, reports Mr. McGlennon; the alternatives for getting rid of PCB's are "excessively high-temperature incineration or a landfill where water supplies would not be contaminated," he explained.

PCB's are only one of four or five hazardous chemicals identified by the EPA "in the last six months," Mr. McGlennon noted, that are believed to be cancer causing.

And he added, "We expect more."

A toxic substances bill currently before the Congress "is our highest priority," he said, so the environmental agency can "require industries to pre-identify hazards."

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PCB trail

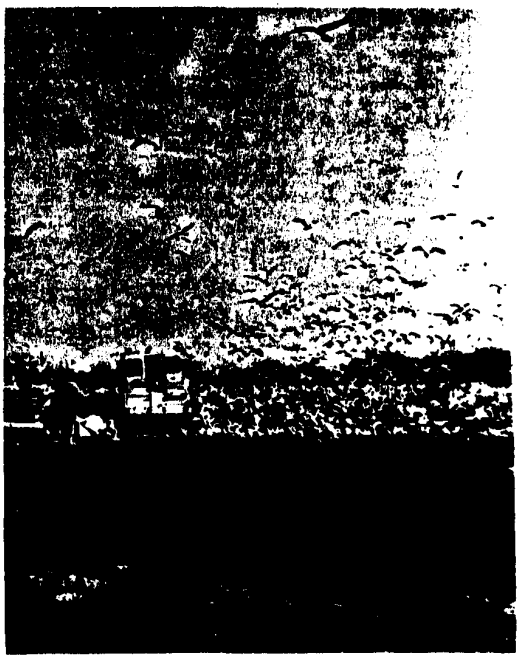
Dartmouth is one of six New England communities being tested for hazardous levels of the chemical PCB in its water supply, because it has been used by two New Bedford firms, Cornell Dubilier on Rodney French Boulevard near Fort Rodman and Aerovox Industries on Belleville Ave. in the North End.

Dartmouth got involved, because PCB's from the two manufacturers may have been dumped at the city's landfill north of Hathaway Rd. Runoff from that site may have found its way to the adjacent Apponagansett Swamp from which the Paskamanset River flows through Smith Mills, North Dartmouth and Russells Mills, South Dartmouth before entering Buzzards Bay as the Slocum River. In addition, the town has wells in North Dartmouth that serve the public water supply.

While Aerovox has already tested the Paskamanset River and found its PCB level to be well below hazardous levels, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is now checking samples from the wells. (*Chronicle photos by John Harwood*)



AEROVOX



NEW BEDFORD LANDFILL

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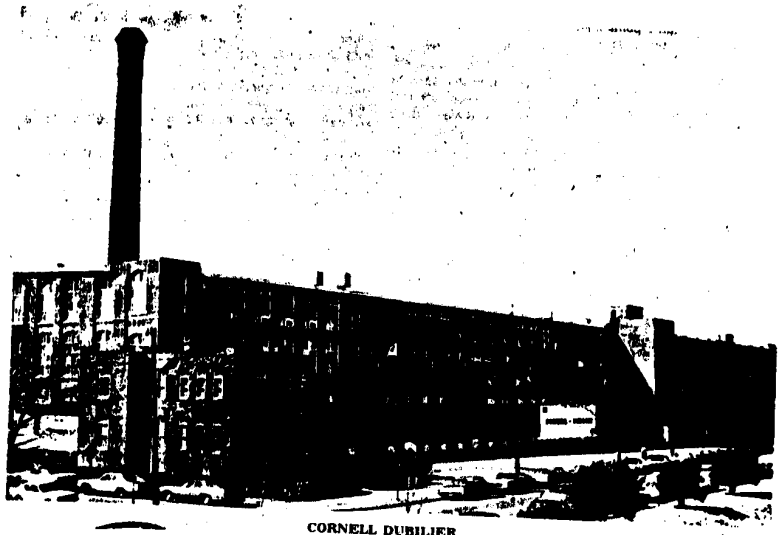

CORNELL DUBILIER

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