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PCB: Colorless, odorless—dangerous

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It's a colorless, odorless substance that is dumped in the Hudson River, gets into the food chain, is stored in fish flesh and ends up in the human body.

The substance is polychlorinated biphenyl, better known as PCB. The chemical has pitted the General Electric Co., which uses it to manufacture electrical equipment at Hudson Falls, against the state Department of Environmental Conservation, which has ordered G.E. to stop dumping PCB into the river.

The DEC order followed the announcement in August that state and federal researchers had found high concentrations of PCB in fish as far south as the Tappan Zee Bay at Tarrytown. Hearings to determine whether the DEC will stick to its order, and whether G.E. will be charged with criminal violations, are being held this month in Albany.

PCB apparently is a good example of the cure that is worse than the disease.

The chemical was developed approximately 50 years ago as a fire retardant coolant for use in electrical capacitors and transformers. Previously more flammable mineral oils were used for the same function.

New insurance regulations and building codes often require that a fire retardant substance be used and there is only one — PCB.

What was not known 50 years ago, and is still not well understood today, is that PCB is a harmful. In fact, the chemical is one of ten on the Environmental Protection Agency's list of dangerous substances — along with mercury and DDT — although no one knows precisely how dangerous it is or what it does.

However, in Japan, where many of the most gruesome effects of industrial pollution have occurred, the consequences of large doses of PCB are all too well known. There it is called "yusho" disease and it causes birth defects, abortions and death.

No Americans reportedly have suffered the fate of the Japanese. However, a host of ill effects of PCB in animals have been catalogued in laboratories near Albany. In fish-eating mink, Stone said he has found PCB to be the cause of abortions, fetal death, uterine ulcers and infertility. Birds he has studied have been missing plumage or have had extra legs.

The sole U.S. manufacturer of PCB, Monsanto Co. of St. Louis, in effect conceded the chemical was dangerous in 1970 when the company asked for and received permission from federal agencies to sell PCB only to the electrical industry. At that time Monsanto recommended the ban because its scientists had found PCB to be "a persistent chemical that builds up in the environment." The company downplayed the reports of birth defects.

Yearly production of PCB has since dropped from 85 million tons in 1970 to 40 million tons last year. It is a significant drop, but what worries the state and environmentalists is the portion of that — estimated to be between 30 and 40 pounds a day — that is being dumped in the Hudson at G.E.'s Hudson Falls and Fort Edwards manufacturing plants.

Also worried are members of the Union of Electrical Workers Local 332 in Fort Edwards which represents workers at the G.E. plants. Union officials are not at all reassured when they read statements from the plant manager to the effect that if G.E. cannot use PCBs the plant will be shutdown.

"I hope (management) will not be so pigheaded that if they don't get what they want they close the plant," said Bernard Leonka, union business agent.

Leonka said the union has taken no position on the dispute between the company and the DEC. But he indicated the union could back either side.

"Our first obligation is to the jobs and to the people who work here," he said. "But as taxpayers we feel industry can't come in and pollute and then make the taxpayers pay for it."

Krupsak: DEC knew five years ago

FISHKILL, N.Y. (AP) — General Electric Company's discharge of a toxic chemical into the Hudson River would have been public knowledge years ago if the state had had a stronger Freedom of Information Act, Lt. Gov. Mary Anne Krupsak says.

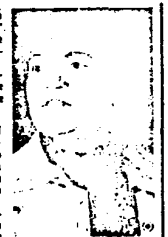
Miss Krupsak said Wednesday night that she learned this week that the state Department of Environmental Conservation had known for five years that GE plants at Hudson Falls and Fort Edward were dumping polychlorinated biphenyls into the river.

"I don't know if it's general knowledge, but (Environmental Conservation Commissioner Ogden) Reid told me personally three days ago that he just uncovered the fact that the department and various people in the bureaucracy and the preceding administration knew that this was going on five years ago and did nothing about it," she told reporters at a talk she gave before a gathering of Dutchess County school administrators.

She called for a stronger Freedom of Information Act, saying that it would have eased access to relevant information in the PCB case.

In a recent complaint, EnCon charged that GE may have done "irreparable damage" to the Hudson by dumping PCB into the river for more than 20 years. PCB, a chemical used for insulating purposes, is fatal to fish eggs and has been found to cause cancer in rats.

A series of hearings is expected to determine whether GE is dumping such a small amount of the chemical that it has no impact.



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