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EPA will require GE here to halt PCB discharges

By Kirk Scharfenberg

The federal Environmental Protection Agency will require General Electric here to reduce its discharge of the toxic chemical PCB into the Housatonic River to zero, no later than June 30, 1977, an EPA aide said this morning.

Betsy Strock, of the EPA's regional office in Boston, said the agency would formally propose the total ban on PCB discharges "very soon," but she added that an exact timetable has not been worked out.

GE officials here have maintained that there is no acceptable substitute for PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) in the manufacture of some transformers produced here and that a total absence of PCB discharges into the Housatonic is impossible because residues of the chemical compound from 40 years of use have built up in pipes and drains and in subsoils around its plant.

Under an existing permit from the EPA, GE here is permitted to have a daily average of 70 parts per billion of PCB in its waste-water discharge into the Housatonic. That, according to GE, amounts to about one-quarter pound of PCB entering the river daily. According to Ms. Strock, EPA will seek to stop that discharge completely by amending the discharge permit it granted GE.

PCB has been found to cause skin irritations, asthmatic bronchitis and funguses in persons who come into repeated contact with it. In 1968, it was blamed for chronic skin diseases contracted by 1,000 Japanese, but in the United States there have been no reports of chronic disorders in humans resulting from its use. Laboratory tests, however, have shown it to cause severe injury to the reproductive systems of fish and mice.

Since 1968, the Monsanto Chemical Co., the only domestic manufacturer of PCB, has limited its sales to the manufacturers of transformers and capacitors. Prior to that time, however, it was used in a wide variety of industrial operations and EPA has estimated that 400 million pounds have been released into the environment since 1929.

Electrical manufacturers maintain PCB is the only material that provides the insulation required in transformers and capacitors and yet is fire-resistant. At the GE operation in Pittsfield it is used in the manufacture of transformers produced for use on trains, in skyscrapers and in other densely populated areas where a serious fire could threaten human life.

GE here says that in recent years it

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has tested more than 100 possible substitutes and has found none that has the proper insulating and fire-resistant properties. In Japan, PCB use has been outlawed and a substitute is utilized.

Since 1972, GE here has reduced considerably its discharge of PCB by processing all waste water through a high-temperature incinerator. Yet, the company maintains, it cannot reduce its discharge to zero.

A recent study by the EPA found high levels of PCB in Housatonic River sediment near the GE outfall and above a dam down river from the plant. The same study also found some PCB in waste water from the Sprague Electric Co. in North Adams. Ms. Strock said a waste-water discharge permit directing a zero discharge would probably be issued there as well. At present, the EPA permits for Sprague make no mention of PCB. Sprague manufactures capacitors and, like GE, has maintained it has found no suitable substitute for PCB.

The announcement of the EPA intention follows by a week and a half a Washington press conference at which EPA Administrator Russell E. Train urged manufacturers to voluntarily phase out the use of PCB.

While the EPA is empowered to regulate water quality, Train said it could not simply ban the use of PCB. Ms. Strock said the proposed ban on PCB discharges at GE could be earlier than June, 1977, but in no event would be later than that date.