

Federal agency starts PCB tests of river here

The federal Environmental Protection Agency has begun a series of tests around the General Electric plant here to determine the level of the toxic chemical PCB in the air and in the Housatonic River water and its bottom sediments.

The tests were launched following reports from New York State that fish in the Hudson River and various upstate lakes had been found to contain unhealthy levels of the compound, which was widely employed until 1972 when its use was limited to closed electrical systems such as the transformers manufactured by GE.

GE here is the only known industrial source of PCB discharge in New England, and the company has a permit from the EPA to discharge .25 pounds of it a day into the Housatonic. Company officials maintain discharges here have not approached that level.

Since 1972, GE here has been disposing most of its PCB, which stands for polychlorinated biphenyls and closely resembles DDT in its chemical structure, by burning it in a high-intensity incinerator. PCB is used to insulate transformers and is utilized because no other chemical has been found that adequately

performs that job and yet is resistant to heat and explosions.

In August, it was learned that tests made by the state in 1971 found that fish taken from the Housatonic below the GE plant here contained extremely high concentrations of PCB, concentrations higher than had been reported in the Hudson River fish at that time.

The company, at that time, said that more recent studies has shown less than a quarter pound of the toxic chemical was reaching the east branch of the Housatonic daily and that most of that was residue from 40 years of accumulated use in pipes, drains and the ground.

In addition to testing the waters of the Housatonic here, the EPA is also studying fish from coastal waters off New England for possible buildups of the chemical and has written to 84 companies, including eight in New England, asking for detailed information on their use of PCB.

John A.S. McGlennon, New England regional administrator for the EPA, said, "I do not think that PCB presents any immediate cause for alarm in New England. There is no need for New Englanders to stop eating striped bass or any other fish because of PCB contamination.

"However, I believe that it is crucial that we continue the controls on PCB discharges that we have already begun in this region and that we be prepared to take any new regulatory action indicated by the results of nationwide studies and testing."