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GE says disputed chemical still tops all substitutes

General Electric here said yesterday that despite tests on more than 100 different materials in recent years, it has found no superior transformer insulating material to substitute for PCB, the chemical that is coming under growing attack from environmentalists and health officials.

Speaking of GE's research efforts, a company spokesman said that "the conclusion as of right now is that there is nothing they (researchers) have tested that is as good as PCB."

On Friday, at a conference in Chicago, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nathaniel P. Reed, declaring that the nation's rivers and lakes are in "mortal danger," called for a ban of all PCB except in transformers and capacitors and asserted that the use of the chemical in even this equipment should be "immediately and critically reviewed."

PCB — polychlorinated biphenyls — are used by GE here to insulate transformers that are to be located near concentrations of people, such as on trains and in skyscrapers. It is used because it both provides the necessary transformer insulation and is nonflammable.

It is particularly the latter property of PCB — its nonflammability — that makes it unique, the GE spokesman emphasized, and it is utilized as a safety precaution.

Since 1972, the Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co. of St. Louis, the only domestic manufacturer of PCB, has limited its sales to manufacturers of transformers and capacitors. However, according to research reported at the Chicago conference last week, substantial quantities of PCB are imported into the country and are used in other manufacturing processes.

Reed said he was "deeply shocked by the pervasiveness of PCB's: they are literally everywhere."

GE plants in New York State that manufacture capacitors have reported that workers who have come into contact with PCB have suffered allergic dermatitis, nausea, dizziness, eye and nasal irritation, asthmatic bronchitis and fungus infections. At GE in Pittsfield, the company has said effects have been limited to "occasional skin and eye irritations of a temporary and nonchronic nature."

It was the discovery of high

concentrations of PCB in fish in the Hudson River — concentrations thought to emanate from GE plants north of Albany — that focused national attention on PCB.

In August, The Eagle reported that state studies made on fish caught in the Housatonic River in 1971 found dangerous concentrations of PCB, concentrations that, in fact, exceeded the levels reported in New York State.

Concentration reduced

Since 1972, however, GE here has been incinerating all but a tiny proportion of its waste PCB and, according to both company and government officials, has reduced the concentration of PCB in effluent going into the Housatonic to less than 70 parts per billion, an amount allowed by a permit issued GE by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

However, company officials have acknowledged that residues of PCB built up in the ground and pipes from 40 years of use continue to enter the Housatonic, but at a rate of less than a quarter-pound a day.

Final authority for controlling PCB rests with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which sponsored last week's conference in Chicago. EPA Administrator Russell E. Train has indicated he would like to see Congress enact legislation regulating its use rather than proceeding on a company-by-company basis under existing federal environmental legislation.