

COMMUNITY NEWS

Portland Sues Monsanto for PCB Cleanup of the Willamette River

Portland's City Attorney brought a resolution before City Council on Wednesday, March 16, to sue Monsanto for cleanup of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the Willamette River and Columbia Slough. The resolution comes after the Portland Harbor Community Advisory Group pointed out to City leaders that six other cities in the west are suing Monsanto for PCB cleanup. "It's about time," said Darise Weller of the Citizen Advisory, "How can Monsanto not have liability? I've been asking that question of political leaders at meetings whenever I can for at least the last 15 years." Portland joins Seattle, Spokane, San Jose, Oakland, Berkeley and San Diego in seeking to recover funds for clean up of the toxin. In 2000 the EPA declared 11 miles of the lower Willamette River a superfund site, citing PCBs as the contaminant of most concern to humans and the environment.

Monsanto, an international agrochemical corporation known for aggressive tactics, was the sole producer of PCBs for 40 years from 1935 to 1979 before they were banned by the EPA. They produced 600,000 tons and made profits. The chemicals were used

Between Our Rivers

By Barbara Quinn



in transformers and other electrical equipment because of their effective fire-resistant properties. That same resistance is what makes the chemicals so persistent in the environment. In fact it is not known how long it takes for PCBs to break down and neutralize in the environment. They have been shown to cause adverse health effects by damaging human immune, reproductive, nervous and endocrine systems and are also known to cause cancer. The chemicals harm fish, birds and other animals and can lead to destruction of habitat for fish. The most serious source of exposure to humans on the Willamette and Columbia Slough is from eating resident fish such as catfish, croppie, bass and carp favored by ethnic and subsistence fishers.

At issue in the lawsuits is when the corporation knew about the dangers of the chemical. According to lawyers representing the cities, Monsanto continued to profit from the sale of PCBs for years even as its officials knew the chemicals were polluting the environment, and causing harm to people and wildlife. They point out there is no way to safely use PCBs to keep them from seeping into soil, water and air. In fact tests reveal that all humans, wildlife and locations on the planet now have some level PCBs though levels have gone down since their ban. They can easily cycle between air, water, and soil. For example, PCBs can enter the air by evaporation from both soil and water. In air, PCBs can be carried long distances and have been found in snow and seawater in areas far away from where they were released into the environment.

Documents uncovered in the Spokane case revealed the company's own medical department warned in 1955 that the chemicals were so toxic, by either ingestion or inhalation, that employees making PCBs could be harmed just from eating lunches contaminated from the chemical fumes or residue on workers' hands. (Seattle seeks millions from Monsanto to clean up PCBs from Duwamish, Seattle-times.com, 1/26/16, Mapes.)

Representatives for Monsanto have said they are not responsible for the cleanup of the chemical since it was distributed by a third party. However, legal action by the cities were initiated with California's evolving public nuisance law. It stipulates that companies may be held liable for chemical contamination if they manufactured and marketed a product despite knowing its dangers. Other

states may be moving in the same direction as California due to the costs of cleanup and damages caused by toxins.

"Monsanto knew then that PCBs were toxic and could not be contained as they readily escaped into the environment finding their way into bays, oceans, lakes, rivers, streams, soil, and air," Environmental Law Firms Baron & Budd and Gomez Trial Attorneys, representing the city of Spokane said. Despite allegedly knowing the risk

posed, Monsanto increased the production of PCBs and concealed this information to make profit, the law firm said. Because of such irresponsible practices PCBs have become a common environmental contaminant that now affect all forms of life. For more information about the issue, Darise Weller of the Portland Harbor Citizen's Advisory recommends the book "Biocidal, Confronting the Poisonous Legacy of PCBs," by Ted Dracos.

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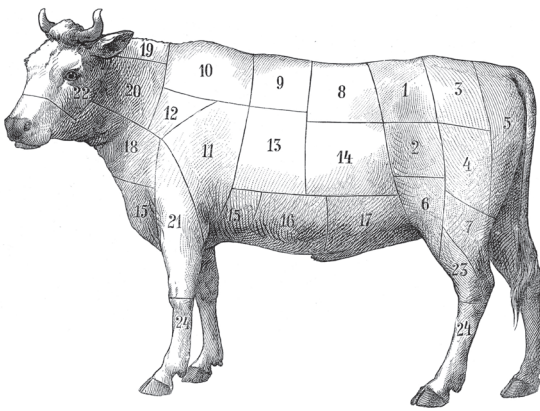
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