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Mills blamed for PCBs

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federal government is making a big mistake, the notices come as no

"They've been making rumblings about it for several months now. In fact, they asked the (state Department of Natural Resources) to join in, to become trustees in this suit. The DNR declined, to its credit," he said.

If the notification leads to litigation, the issue to be decided in federal court probably will center on the financing of a PCB cleanup program for the Fox River.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are now-banned chemical compounds that were once widely used by Fox River paper mills.

Although no one knows how much an aggressive PCB cleanup campaign would cost, some estimates run into hundreds of millions of dollars.

Carey said the move by the federal government to identify potentially responsible parties comes at a time when a cooperative approach for dealing with PCBs in the Fox River was unfolding. Guided by the Fox River Coalition, an alliance that includes area municipalities, industries and the DNR, real progress was being made, Carey said.

"The Department of Natural Resources and the Fox River Coalition have urged Fish and Wildlife to hold off and allow the cooperative process currently under way for the cleanup to unfold," he said.

"They decided to move forward with the initial stages of a natural resources damage suit. We believe it's extremely poor timing."

That view was stated earlier by the coalition, which warned the Fish and Wildlife Service by letter that identifying potentially responsible parties would undermine its work.

"Once (responsible parties) are named, our voluntary, 'no-fault' effort will be reduced to an adversarial situation which will likely result in the dissolution of the coalition," the coalition said.

Sal Cianciola, the president of Wisconsin Tissue Mills, down-played the notification, saying it is far too early to say what it means.

"I don't even think it's a story now. It's something that's in its initial stages. You can make a lot of assumptions, people can say a lot of things, but who really knows?" he said.

But Cliff Bowers, a Fort Howard spokesman, was troubled by the Fish and Wildlife Service action.

"Progress was being made and this action to some degree may threaten that," he said.

■ The Associated Press contributed to this story.