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Superfund: Stakes are high all around

EPA leader takes hard line on PCBs, health

By Susan Campbell
Press-Gazette

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol Browner "set the record straight" about PCBs' potential health risks during an appearance before the New York State Assembly's Committee on Environmental Conservation.

There to counter claims by General Electric that PCB contamination in 200 miles of the Hudson River does not threaten public health, Browner spoke to the committee July 9.

That was the same day the EPA announced it will propose the Fox River for Superfund designation because of widespread contamination from polychlorinated biphenyls.

"I want to set the record straight about this chemical's serious threat to public health and the environment," she said.

"We do not have every single answer, nor every single piece of data. But clearly, the science has spoken: PCBs are a serious threat to our health, a threat to our environment, a threat to our future."

"To suggest, as GE does, that no action should be taken because some of the PCB studies may be inconclusive flies in the face of every decision this country has made in the last quarter century to protect human health and the environment."

Browner said if that logic had been applied to past environmental health issues, the EPA would not have been able to make the decision to ban lead in gasoline and paint when it did -- leaving another generation to suffer the effects.

The administrator's speech was widely noted in Green Bay last week by those involved in plans for cleaning the Fox River.

"It's hard to read that and not get the impression that EPA is serious about doing something about PCBs in the sediment," said Bruce Baker, who oversees the Fox River cleanup as a deputy administrator with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Browner also explained the 16-month delay in the release of dredging studies for the Hudson River. The time is needed to correct errors in project data and allow for outside scientific and public review of its findings, she said.

That announcement had irked environmentalists who have been pushing for dredging to begin on the Hudson, which was listed as a Superfund site in 1983. The agency made an interim decision in 1994 to take no action on the cleanup but in 1990 called for a second cleanup study.

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