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Committee hears testimony on PCB legislation

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MADISON -- State Rep. Carol Owens says she has yet to see a landfill that doesn't leak.

"We all know anything man-made is not foolproof," the Oshkosh Republican said.

On Monday, Owens told her colleagues there is a better way to deal with **PCB**-contaminated sediments than placing them in a landfill. She asked a state committee to support a bill banning the practice.

"It will protect the health and well-being of the residents," Owens said.

Unfortunately for Owens, her fellow lawmakers did not take action Monday, and her bill drew opposition from the state Department of Natural Resources.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are man-made chemicals that formerly were used in the paper industry. The chemical has been linked to cancer, birth problems and animal defects.

Owens drafted the bill in response to concerns raised by residents in and around the Town of Vinland, located between Neenah and Oshkosh in Winnebago County, the planned home to 784,000 cubic yards of **PCB**-contaminated Fox River sediments.

Two paper companies, Glatfelter and WTM I (formerly Wisconsin Tissue Mills), have each agreed to pay \$25 million for the cleanup of the Fox River, which is anticipated to begin next year. The Georgia Pacific paper company offered the use of its Vinland landfill for sediment disposal.

The Owens bill would put the brakes on this plan in favor of a new technology called vitrification, a process that uses heat to convert **PCB**-contaminated sediments into usable building materials that can be incorporated into roads and buildings.

Owens hopes the bill will be passed quickly. But the Legislature's session ends next week, and on Monday, members of the Assembly's Natural Resources Committee took no action on the bill after expressing skepticism about the cost and feasibility of vitrification. To become law, the bill would have to be acted on by the committee, and be approved by both houses of the Legislature and Gov. Jim Doyle.

"I'm not sure where this is going to go right now," said state Rep. Scott Gunderson, R-Waterford, a committee member. "There are a lot of questions."

Susan Bangert, director of the DNR's Bureau of Waste Management, said vitrification has not been tested on a large scale, so it is unknown what problems could occur.

She said landfills are designed to prevent groundwater contamination, and she said vitrification could significantly raise the cost of the first segment of the cleanup, which includes Little Lake Butte des Morts.

"The vitrification costs would be approximately \$40 million more than the land filling costs (of \$60 million)," Bangert said.

Ed Willis of the Wisconsin Paper Council said that for the entire Fox River cleanup, vitrification would increase costs from \$400 to \$600 million.

"That's a lot of money in anybody's calculation," he said.

Several Vinland-area residents testified in support of the **PCB** ban.

Jim Erdman, a supervisor with the Town of Oshkosh, said vitrification, unlike disposal of PCBs in a landfill, is a permanent solution to an environmental problem.

"Down the line, you are going to have to deal with (the PCBs)," he said. "Who is going to pay for it?"

Vinland resident Nancy Zimmerman asked the committee to consider using the new vitrification technology.

"Please do it right, once and for all," she said.

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