

Aerial photos of 1956 shown to jurors

By DAN KENNEDY

BOSTON — Aerial photographs show that a 15-acre parcel owned by the John J. Riley tannery in East Woburn was contaminated as far back as 1956, jurors in the Woburn leukemia trial were told Tuesday in U.S. District Court.

John Drobinski, a geologist hired by eight East Woburn families who are suing two corporate giants, testified that aerial photos of the site taken in 1956, 1966, 1969 and 1974 clearly show debris piles, cylindrical

steel tanks and other objects.

The plaintiffs in the case charge that the parcel was used by the tannery as a dumping area for toxic chemicals.

Under questioning by Jan Schlichtmann, the plaintiffs' lawyer, Drobinski said many of the objects seen in the aerial photos are in the same locations as debris he discovered while inspecting the property last year.

The objects also correspond, he said, to locations of 55-gallon barrels, sludge and other debris described in a 1980 report by Brian Kelleher, a former

engineer for the state Department of Environmental Quality Engineering.

Drobinski, who has been on the witness stand since last Thursday, previously testified that soil, sludge and groundwater samples on the site contain industrial solvents cited by the families in their lawsuit, and that, in his opinion, the contamination is related to tanning operations.

But on Tuesday, Drobinski was prevented from testifying whether he believed the solvents were present in the groundwater before 1979 — the year

municipal drinking water wells G and H were closed after they were found to be contaminated.

Instead, Judge Walter Jay Skinner ordered that Drobinski be questioned by lawyers in the absence of the jury to determine whether his testimony should be allowed.

Skinner told the lawyers he wanted to determine whether Drobinski was qualified to offer such testimony and whether there was a solid factual foundation for offering it.

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If Judge Skinner allows him to do so, Drobinski is prepared to testify that the solvents were present before 1979.

With the jurors out of the courtroom, Drobinski said his investigation showed numerous objects on the 15-acre site had been there from 1960 to the early 1970s. Those objects include a prescription bottle, newspapers, beer cans and date-stamped 55-gallon barrels.

The contamination took place in the early- to mid-1960s and ended in the early '70s, he said.

"Do you assert this opinion with a fair degree of scientific certainty?" Schlichtmann asked.

"Yes I do, sir," Drobinski replied.

Questioning of Drobinski was expected to continue today, with Skinner making a ruling on his testimony before bringing the jury back into the courtroom.

The Woburn families charge that chemicals dumped on the ground at the Riley tannery (formerly owned by Beatrice Foods Co., which retains legal responsibility) and at W.R. Grace & Co.'s Cryovac manufacturing plant contaminated wells G and H, resulting in the leukemia deaths of five children and the illnesses of two children and one adult.

The defendants counter that no contaminants which may be on their properties flowed into the wells. They also assert that the solvents named by the plaintiffs do not cause leukemia or the other diseases the plaintiffs cite.