

Fish death mystery prompted Aberjona study

By DAN KENNEDY

BOSTON — In the spring of 1970, a team from the Massachusetts Division of Fish and Wildlife decided to do something to improve fishing in Winchester's Upper Mystic Lake.

But when they poured a load of trout into the lake, the fish immediately went belly up. Hurriedly, the men netted the fish and brought them to Horn Pond in Woburn, where they quickly recovered.

A short time later, state officials decided whatever was wrong at Mystic Lake had probably dissipated. The trout were taken from Horn Pond and placed back in Mystic.

This time, they died.

The incident prompted an investigation by the state Division of Water Pollution Control (DWPC). The agency's attention immediately focused on the Aberjona River, which flows into Mystic Lake.

The man who headed up that investigation, Robert Cady, appeared in U.S. District Court Thursday to testify about his findings.

Cady, currently a supervising sanitary engineer for DWPC, was subpoenaed by W.R. Grace & Co., a defendant in the Woburn leukemia trial.

The plaintiffs, eight East Woburn families, contend that chemical contaminants at Grace's Cryovac manufacturing facility, 369 Washington St., flowed through groundwater and polluted municipal wells G and H, leading to six deaths and two illnesses.

Lawyers for Grace, however, say the wells, on the east bank of the Aberjona River, drew half their water from the river, which has a history of industrial contamination dating back to the early 1900s. The wells were used from 1964 to 1979.

The plaintiffs counter that little or no river water ever entered the wells.

In the fall of 1970, Cady conducted a sanitary survey of the Aberjona River and its tributaries, studying discharge from drainage pipes, storm drains and runoff.

While he did not conduct specific tests for the organic chemical solvents that are at issue in the trial — such tests were not technologically possible at the time — he did conduct one series of tests for "chemical oxygen demand," which he said would reveal the presence of most organic chemicals.

Cady is expected to discuss those results today when the trial resumes.

Also testifying Thursday were Alfred DeFeo and Richard Warrington, who helped conduct a study of the Aberjona River and its tributaries in 1971 while they were graduate engineering students at Tufts University.

Warrington, of Bedford, is superintendent of public works and city engineer in Melrose. From 1980 to 1984, he was operations manager for water and sewer services in Winchester.

Warrington became involved in the 1971 study because his faculty adviser, Dr. N. Bruce Hanes, was chairman of the Aberjona River Commission. Hanes is also a former member and chairman of the Winchester Board of Health.

In court Thursday, Warrington identified a series of photographs he took in 1971 showing a polluted drainage ditch running along the Boston and Maine Railroad tracks. The ditch begins in Wilmington and ends at Hall's Brook, a tributary to the Aberjona River, in North Woburn.

Warrington and DeFeo both testified that a number of industries north and upstream of wells G and H dumped industrial contaminants into the ditch. Those included plants in Wilmington and Woburn, as well as

the Woburn city dump.

Warrington's photos depicted discolored water and considerable quantities of refuse, including 55-gallon barrels.

Plaintiffs' attorney Jan R. Schlichtmann asked Warrington and DeFeo whether, during their investigation, they ever observed large storage tanks, barrels and other refuse on a property formerly owned by Grace's co-defendant, Beatrice Foods Co.

They both replied that they did not. Under further questioning by Beatrice attorney Jerome P. Facher, Warrington added that the Beatrice site was "in extremely good condition and much in contrast to what we'd seen north of there."

The Beatrice property is part of the Riley Leather Co. tannery, 228 Salem St., which Beatrice owned from 1978 to 1983. The plaintiffs allege the tannery allowed the property to be used as a chemical dumping ground.

Schlichtmann also asked Warrington whether he made any attempt to determine whether the river was polluting wells G and H.

"No, we didn't," Warrington replied.

"That wasn't of concern to you?" Schlichtmann asked.

"In terms of the research we did, no," the witness responded.