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EPA Cites Toxic Liquids in Streams

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Washington — Toxic liquids which the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) suspects may be cancer-causing have been found in high concentrations in streams entering the Gulf of Mexico, EPA officials reported.

EPA Administrator Russell E. Train said Monday that the substances, called polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) are widespread and constitute a "serious threat to human health and the environment."

He said EPA considers PCB's to be "suspected carcinogens," which are cancer-causing substances.

PCB's are manufactured in the U.S. exclusively by the Monsanto Chemical Co. and are used mostly as insulating fluid in electrical equipment. They have been found in excessive levels in fish taken from the Great Lakes, the upper Mississippi River, off the Southern California coast, in the Hudson River and other New York waterways, as well as in streams entering the Gulf of Mexico Train said.

Thomas Kopp of EPA's toxic substances office said PCB's have not been found in fish in the Gulf itself or any Texas waterways, but added, "We haven't looked for them in Texas yet. When we do, we'll probably find they're there."

A transformer manufacturing company in Waco, Van Tran Electric Co., was listed by EPA as one of 38 industrial users of PCB's. It was the only Texas firm known to use the substance in the equipment it manufactures.

Train said there is "no reason whatsoever for community concern" in areas where industries use PCB's, but said the main hazard is in eating fish from contaminated water.

"The most serious potential health problem from PCB's which we are able to identify today would come from eating fish which contain PCB's exceeding the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) tolerance level" of five parts per million. Those are the levels EPA called excessive in naming the affected waterways.

In addition to possibly causing cancer in humans, PCB's have been found in laboratory tests to cause reproductive failures, gastric disorders, skin lesions and tumors in mammals, Train said.

In areas where they are concentrated, the substances "threaten to destroy commercial and sport fishing" because of the contamination and the possible loss of reproduction among the fish, he noted.

About 400 million pounds of PCB's have entered the environment — in landfills, air, water and river bottom sediments — in the last 45 years that the substance has been manufactured, Train said.

Until a few years ago, the liquids were widely used in paints, plastics, carbonless copy paper and other products.

In 1971, Monsanto restricted PCB sales to manufacturers of electronic equipment. Because they are fire-resistant, the liquids are used in high-power transformers and capacitors which might otherwise catch fire.



RUSSELL E. TRAIN

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