A DDT-Like Liquid Studied for Hazards

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 22 — Officials of seven Federal agencies are expressing increasing concern over the possible health hazards of a colorless, odorless liquid named PCB that some scientists hold to be even more dangerous than DDT, to which it has a close chemical resemblance.

Large amounts of PCB, perhaps tens of thousands of tons, are used annually as insulating fluids and as a means of transferring heat from one mechanism to another, such as in electrical transformers, because it has an extraordinary ability to stand up under heat. PCB, which has the consistency of molasses, can withstand temperatures of up to 1,600 de-

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grees Fahrenheit. It is also used in noncarbon copying paper, paints and pesticides.

In the last few months large amounts of PCB, or polychlorinated biphenyl, have been found in chickens, eggs, turkeys, salmon and fish meal.

This led the President's Office of Science and Technology and his Council on Environmental Quality to form a study group two weeks ago to investigate the presence of PCB in food and other compounds.

Since mid-August at least three scientific meetings have extensively discussed PCB, including a session of Nobel laureates in Goteborg, Sweden. The scientists concluded that PCB "concentrations may reach levels sufficient to damage ecosystems irreversibly on a worldwide scale before the damage is recognized."

"Their entry into the marine environment should be curtailed to every practical extent, even if this requires constrictions on their production and use," the Goteborg statement added.

Wide Use of Concern

William D. Ruckelshaus, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, noted in an interview today that "it is the sudden accumulation of information about PCB that gives us concern because it is used so widely in the environment."

The agency is part of the PCB study group, which also includes representatives of the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Interior, and the Food and Drug Administration.

Dr. Charles C. Edwards, F.D.A. Commissioner, also said in an interview today that the study group had been convened at his agency's request "because we realized that PCB was a hell of a lot bigger problem than that of the F.D.A alone."

James D. Grant, the deputy F.D.A. Commissioner, said, "We want PCB out of the food supply, but we don't yet regard it as an imminent hazard to health."

The chemical has been in use for 40 years. Like DDT, it resists decomposition and hence persists in the environment for years. DDT and PCB are so alike chemically that until several years ago it was almost impossible to detect one from the other by microchemical analysis.

Undetectable Difference

Because of this heretofore undetectable difference, much of the environmental contamination by DDT is believed to have been caused by a combination of DDT and PCB.

To date, there has been only one episode linking PCB with health hazards to humans. Three years ago in Japan five persons died and about 1,000 were afflicted with a severe skin disease named chloroacne because a rice cooking oil had been contaminated by PCB.

There have also been indications that some pregnant women who became ill later then had babies with birth defects.

Dr. Robert Risebrough, an authority on PCB who is a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, told a Senate Commerce subcommittee last month that two babies were stillborn and "all showed symptoms' of PCB poisoning.

Yet Dr. Risebrough and other authorities have raised the possibbility that PCB in itself may not be harmful to humans, but that the culprit may be a chemical byproduct named chlorinated dibenzofuran. This chemical is believed to be capable of causing birth defects to fowl, fish and perhaps rats.

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