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Ban On PCBs Still To Be Written

The 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act gave the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) the power for the first time to control and even to stop production and use of any chemical that presents an unreasonable risk of injury to health or the environment. The law also specifically required EPA to draw up regulations for the banning of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a group of industrial pollutants that have been in use since 1929. PCBs currently are not manufactured in this country because Monsanto, the sole American PCB producer, voluntarily stopped making them last year. But the EPA still must promulgate a formal ban on PCB manufacture, processing and commercial disribution. A hearing on the rulemaking procedure for the proposed ban is scheduled by the EPA for Monday, Aug. 21, in Washington, D.C.

PCBs are used as insulating fluids in electrical equipment such as transformers and capacitors, but also are employed in the production of adhesives, sealants, printing inks, coatings and waxes. Concerns about PCB pollution have been voiced since 1968, when some 1,000 Japanese citizens were severely affected after ingesting PCB-contaminated rice oil. Japan has prohibited all production and importation of PCBs.

In 1972, the U.S. government took its first action against the chemical. At that time EPA recommended prodaction curbs, and Monsanto voluntarily stopped selling PCBs to those customers who released them into the environment. Later studies showed that salmon, striped bass and other fish in American waterways still contained high concentrations of the chemical.

Traces of the millions of pounds of PCBs that have been released into the environment have been found far from industrial areas — in the Hudson River, the Great Lakes, the upper Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, among other places. The main worry is that PCBs — which take many years to disappear from fish tissues and bottom sediments and which have been proved to cause reproductive defects and death in fish, birds and mammals — may spread further up the food chain.