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PCBs to be phased out

By John Woolcott
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The Monsanto Co. announced yesterday that it will stop making PCBs, chemicals used in electrical equipment which have been linked to a lethal form of skin cancer.

In St. Louis, Earle H. Harbison Jr., vice-president of Monsanto's specialty chemicals division, said the company will cease PCB production at its Sauget, Ill., plant and sell off all existing stocks of the chemicals no later than Oct. 31, 1977. Monsanto is the sole American manufacturer of PCBs.

The action comes just weeks after the Senate and House of Representatives approved legislation banning the chemicals. The bill, the Toxic Substances Control Act, is awaiting President Ford's signature.

Harbison said Monsanto would have stopped PCB production sooner if electrical equipment manufacturers had been able to switch to alternative compounds more quickly. At the moment, he said, the manufacturers are testing possible replacements. PCBs were prized for their fire resistance.

Although they have long been key ingredients in fluorescent light fixtures, air conditioners, and televisions, PCBs have emerged recently as one of the nation's toughest environmental problems.

They have been found in high levels in fish taken from the Hudson River and the Great Lakes. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the nation's landfills, air, and water contain 300 million pounds of PCBs.

Linked to cancer

An unfinished study by the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in August found an unusual number of cases of malignant melanoma, a lethal form of skin cancer, among workers at a Michel Oil Co. plant and laboratory in Pedricktown, on the Delaware River below Camden. The evidence, although limited, was the first indication of a hazard to the 12,000 American workers exposed to PCBs.

Scientists discovered that the very qualities which made PCBs so desirable in electrical equipment — resistance to heat and other stresses — make them nearly impossible to eliminate in the environment.

In New York, for example, General Electric Co., which dumped the chemicals into the Hudson from two plants north of Albany, has agreed to help pay for a cleanup, but scientists are unsure of how to get the chemicals out of the river.

A Monsanto spokesman said yesterday that the decision to halt production of PCBs will not result in any layoffs at the Sauget plant. Only about 20 of the factory's 1,500 workers were involved in PCB production, he said, and all of them will be transferred to other jobs.

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