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Union is angry that workers weren't told

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substitute waxes that have been tested and contain no PCBs, G.E. said. One of the substitutes still carries the Rigidex brand name.

Except for some details, G.E.'s statement corroborated information obtained from government reports, interviews with companies involved in the production of Rigidex, and government officials.

From these sources, the following story emerged:

Polychlorinated terphenyls have long been used as a "filler" in the type of wax used by G.E. and also in the casting industry. The PCTs help keep the wax from shrinking when it is cooled.

It is also well known that PCTs are contaminated with PCBs. In fact, Monsanto Chemical Co., the major U.S. manufacturer of both chemicals until 1972, made its PCTs out of PCBs.

Monsanto stopped making PCTs in 1972.

"At that point it caused quite a problem in the wax industry," says Lou Argueso, the vice-president of Argueso and Co. of Mamaroneck, N.Y., the company that made Rigidex for G.E.

The wax manufacturers turned to France and Italy for PCTs and PCBs. Argueso imported its PCTs from France, and they were supplied by a Providence, R.I., company, Tilaco, Inc.

About two years ago, according to Argueso, the EPA decided to ban the importation of any product that contained more than 50 parts per million (ppm) of PCBs.

Argueso was forced to stop using PCTs soon afterward, because "the people we were getting it from could not guarantee to us it was less than 50 ppm," Lou Argueso said this week.

At around the same time, he said, G.E. asked whether Rigidex wax contained PCTs, "and we told them it did," said Argueso.

Because G.E. was "very sensitive" about PCBs after being implicated in the contamination of the Hudson River in New York State, the company said it wouldn't buy any more Rigidex, Argueso said.

The Argueso firm had been looking "for years" for a substitute for PCTs, Argueso said. After the EPA rule, and G.E.'s decision, Argueso suddenly managed to find a substitute, with G.E.'s help, and the company is still selling Rigidex blue wax to G.E.

Both Argueso and Andrew Melechinsky, vice-president of Tilaco, said tests of their PCT products showed less than 50 ppm of PCBs, but they wouldn't provide any specific results. Argueso also said Rigidex red wax contained no PCTs or PCBs.

In 1976, the EPA published an exhaustive report on the uses of PCBs and PCTs in this country.

Robert Westin, a senior chemical engineer for Versar, Inc., the Springfield, Va., company that prepared the report, says flatly: "There isn't anybody who can make PCTs with less than 50 ppm PCBs."

Westin says the reports he has seen showed PCB levels ranging from 1,000 ppm to 200,000 ppm.

Although the hazards of PCBs are recognized, the toxicity of PCTs is unknown, and that chemical has fallen into a regulatory crack.

Almost four years ago, in April 1978, a federal government committee established to evaluate chemicals urged that PCTs be tested to see if they caused cancer, birth defects, or genetic damage.

The committee said it was concerned about PCTs because they have a "chemical structure similar to PCBs," because they have been widely dispersed in the environment, because they have been found in human milk, blood and fat, and because health studies on PCTs were either incomplete or nonexistent.

EPA, the federal agency that can decide whether to order such tests, did not act on the request until last November.

By that time, PCTs were no longer being imported or produced in the U.S., so the EPA said there was no need to test the chemical.

What about people exposed to PCTs in the past? "That is a problem," said Gary Timm, a supervisory chemist for EPA's test rule development branch in Washington. "But it's not a problem that the law gives us much of a handle on."

Noting that the European economic community had banned PCTs, Timm said, "PCTs are pretty bad chemically. We would have been very concerned had not the PCB regulations taken care of them."

Robert Burruss, another Versar staff member who wrote a separate report on PCTs for the government, says there has been no evidence "that anybody actually suffered" from PCTs.

But Burruss says that if he were working with PCTs "I would certainly periodically get a liver function test and watch out for skin problems." No such tests have been performed on G.E. employees.

But in the next breath, Burruss says that "in the environmental business you can get neurotic. Really all we have is conjecture."

This uncertainty worries Frank Kashner at G.E. He is angry at the company for not telling its employees what was in the wax they used. "Why, we used to breathe wax, we practically ate wax," he says.

But Andrew Melechinsky, whose Providence company was probably the sole importer of PCTs for waxes in the 1970s, thinks PCBs and PCTs are healthy compared to other things.

"I will take a teaspoon of PCBs or PCTs and put it in a glass of milk," he said over the telephone this week. "And you take a teaspoon of motor oil and put it in a glass of milk. You can keep on drinking glasses of milk, and so will I. You'll get sick, and I'll still be sitting there smiling at you."

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