PCBs: Chemicals With New Notoriety

By ANDY SOLTIS

For a family of chemicals with a wide range of industrial uses and a 46-year history, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) have accumulated a great deal of controversy very quickly.

At state hearings on the potential dangers of the toxic chemicals yesterday, scientists disagreed over whether PCBs in the environment are at a dangerous level, whether they could be safely handled and whether they could be replaced with something else.

Earlier this week the state Dept. of Environmental Conservation conducted hearings on two upstate General Electric capacitor plants which, it claimed, discharged PCBs into the Hudson River and contaminated freshwater fish.

PCBs are a family of 209 chemicals that are used in a variety of products and carbonless copy paper.

The chief of the federal Environmental Protection Agency unit investigating PCBs' toxicity, David Garrett, told Attorney General Lefkowitz and a crowded hearing room in the World Trade Center, "I'm sure we're all breathing PCBs right now," referring to the presence of capacitors using PCB in the overhead fluorescent lighting.

However, another federal official, Albert Kolbye of the Food and Drug Administration, said, "We believe that exposure to PCB has been going down very quickly" in recent years.

John Highland, of the Environmental Defense Fund, challenged this, saying that FDA's schedule of allowable limits of PCB in fish and other food was "completely and totally inadequate" because of recent research on mice that indicates that PCB can cause cancer. Highland said PCB concentrations had reached "alarming levels in New York State."

'Defied Research'

Another witness, Lewis Cohen, testified he was certain PCB had escaped from his Universal Voltronics plant in Mt. Kisco despite safeguards.

But a representative of the sole U. S. manufacturer of PCB, the Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co., said Cohen's experience "doesn't seem to fit our experience."

William Papageorge, manager of Monsanto's product acceptability unit, said it now sold PCB with a lower level of chlorination so that less of the chemical could find its way into food. Papageorge also said PCB had "defied 45 years of research" to find an adequate substitute.

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