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PCB costs criticized

Electric utilities' spokesmen last week urged the Environmental Protection Agency to soften the proposed ban on using polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). They sharply criticized plans to ban PCB use where it is not "totally enclosed." One reason: the ban would, in effect, not allow use of present ways of servicing or disposing of electrical transformers or capacitors that use PCBs as an insulating fluid. The utilities also assailed EPA's projections for compliance costs as too low.

Since Monsanto, the sole U.S. supplier, voluntarily halted PCB production in October 1977, the utilities' arguments are aimed largely at the costs involved in making existing equipment comply with the proposed regulations.

EPA's proposal specified totally enclosed systems to "ensure that any exposure of human beings or the environment to PCB chemical substance or PCB mixtures will be insignificant—that is, not measurable or detectable by any analytical method." That would bar leakage or spillage during repairs or disposal of the heavy-duty electrical equipment. But the June 7 PCB proposal would not apply to PCBs used in consumer products, such as capacitors in home appliances, the utilities noted.

William C. Gerstner, executive vice-president of Illinois Power and chairman of the electric utility PCB task force, contended that compliance costs for that industry would be about $4.5 billion—far above EPA's estimates that compliance would cost all industry $46 million/year, plus another $100 million/year for prohibiting the use of PCB-contaminated oil to control dust on roads. Several other utility representatives agreed with the $4.5-billion cost estimate, and one of Duke Power's (Charlotte, N.C.) witnesses estimated that it would cost his company alone at least $42 million to comply.

EPA does not expect to issue a final regulation until early October. If EPA accepts the utilities arguments, the agency may relax the proposed five-year phase-in period for enclosing systems.

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