TOP OF THE NEWS

PCBs come under fire

Monsanto has had a program since '68 to keep its polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) plasticizers from contaminating the environment, says Howard Minckler, vice-president and general manager of the company's Organic Chemicals Division.

That's Minckler's reply to a demand by Representative William Ryan (D., N.Y.) for controls on the use of such products. Ryan contends that the PCBs, like DDT (another polychlorinated polycyclic compound), are ecologically harmful in that they persist in nature, are toxic to animals and affect the reproductive cycle. Ryan is calling for a ban on PCB in pesticides, fixing of food tolerance levels, and studies by the Environmental Quality Council and the Interior Dept.

PCBs, which are made by other companies in Europe and Japan, were found in fish in '66 by Swedish scientists. Studies at the University of California have confirmed the presence of these chemicals in the environment. Ryan says that "Environment"—the publication of the Scientists Institute for Public Information (St. Louis)—brought this matter to his attention.

Closed Systems Monsanto, which makes its Aroclor plasticizers in plants at Anniston, Ala., and Sauget, Ill., concedes that PCBs have appeared in the environment. Minckler points out that these products—unlike pesticides—are not sprayed or dusted on crops or lands. In fact, it is marketed chiefly as a sealed system in the insulation of transformers and capacitors.

"We do not know of any current use of PCBs in insecticides," Minckler continues. "Even so, we are asking the Agriculture Dept. to reject any insecticide that has PCB as an inert carrier."

He emphasizes that PCB is not used in household products. It appears that the material gets into the environment from the manufacturing process or from decomposition of discarded products containing PCBs.

Ryan believes that federal action is needed, but Monsanto, which maintains that the material is not highly toxic, is already tightening its precautions against PCB pollution. Among the measures adopted: use of alternate products where advisable, improved production techniques and pollution control devices, and coordination with customers.

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