JUN 2

MONS 000955

A Harvest Of Poison Awaits Us...

By Karl Grossman

Under us all in America are millions and millions of slowly exploding time bombs of PCB's. For 48 years, the manmade substance, suspected of causing cancer and other illnesses, has been manufactured in the U.S. In landfill sites across the country lie an estimated 100 million pounds of PCB's, leaching into our groundwater and waterways as what it was contained in rusts and corrodes away.



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The problem, which is not expected by the federal Environmental Protection Agency to go away for 50 years or more — even though the sole U.S. manufacturer of PCB's plans to stop making the toxic chemical in October — is particularly acute for Suffolk.

We get our water supply from the groundwater below, like no other major populated area. Poisons put into dumps leach out into our water supply. This is an island with a strong fishing base, much of it involving striped bass and bluefish, two species notably prone to PCB's contamination.

Last year, New York State Commerce Commissioner John Dyson was complaining about loss of revenue to the state if two General Electric plants which spewed PCB's into the Hudson were forced to close. Instead, the Hudson was closed to most commercial fishing. Off our shores, bluefish and striped bass, some of which spawn in the Hudson, bring in $636,000 yearly to Suffolk fishermen.

And now Island fishermen, who've had a hard enough time trying to eke out a living faced with fleets of foreign "factory" ships, fear economic disaster anew this time from the products of domestic factories if new federal standards lowering the permissible level of PCB's in fish take effect.

General Electric, under pressure, found a substitute for PCB's. So did Japan, a nation not noted for environmental sensitivity, after ten died and a thousand came down with serious illnesses, including cancer, after eating rice oil containing PCB's leaked from an electrical device.

On a visit to Suffolk last year, arranged by Rep. Thomas A. Downey of West Islip, Korishi Saito, a Japanese government official in charge of watchdogging the country's chemical industry at the time of the 1968 incident, said mineral oil derivatives were put into use — non-toxic substances which break down in nature.

The Japanese banned production or importation of PCB's soon after the mass poisoning, but here in the U.S., government was still talking about what to do last year. The charge by Mr. Downey was that the sole maker of PCB's here, Monsanto Chemicals Company and big users like GE, were "fighting tooth and nail against banning it."

Finally, public concern built to a high point. "We have identified a mad dog in PCB's, and it's time to get rid of it," declared a Maryland congressman in arguing for the Toxic Substances Control Act. Politicians had a "moral responsibility to the people," said California Rep. Ron Dellums.

The alphabet-soup designation of PCB's might not strike a responsive chord. In fact, PCB's have been and still are in widespread use in this country — despite their toxic qualities and despite the Japanese incident nearly a decade ago.

They've been a basic item in the great plastic boom of the post World War II years, used as a plasticizer and in paints, for carbonless copy paper hydraulic fluid, soap, even printing ink.

Inert and fire-resistant, they're a central component in many electrical devices. Every fluorescent light fixtures has a capacitor containing PCB's. They're in TV sets, air conditioners and especially in large industrial transformers and capacitors. All this stuff wears out or is discarded, is thrown in dumps and breaks down — but not the PCB's.

The full name is polychlorinated biphenyls, a chlorinated hydrocarbon quite similar to DDT. And like so many of the organic chemicals developed in the past decades, it's not readily biodegradable. It needs incineration at a temperature higher than 2,700 degrees farenheit to be eliminated. Heavier than water, it sinks to be ingested by micro-organisms and becomes part of the food chain, tending to accumulate in longer-lived animals. It seeks fatty tissue.

And, PCB's are not alone. Some 1,000 other new chemical compounds are created each year in the U.S., according to the Environmental Protection Agency, and until the Toxic Substances Control Act was passed, there was no government control. Now, industry will have to test chemicals they produce for toxicity. Whether industry will police itself is debatable. GE last year conceded findings it provided on PCB's contamination in the Hudson were faulty.

Nature, through eons of time, created a system in which everything breaks down and life rises again, a continuing circle. Modern man has thrown a monkey wrench into this system and one of nature's reactions has been cancer, all but becoming a modern plague. This harvest of poison will not be eliminated in our lifetimes.