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SECTION A

Worse than DDT?

Early in the 1960s the late Rachel Carson's book, "Silent Spring," drew the public's attention to the dangers of widespread contamination by DDT. A few years later the federal government moved to curb the use of DDT and other pesticides resistant to biodegradation.

Yet at the same time a group of industrial pollutants, older than DDT, was quietly accumulating in the environment and nobody paid much attention. Now scientists have come around to the view that these particular pollutants, known as PCBs, pose an even more serious threat to the ecology than DDT ever did. They persist longer and are more toxic at lower levels of accumulation than had been understood.

PCB is short for polychlorinated biphenyls, chemicals derived from benzene. They offer industry certain advantages. Among them are chemical stability, fire resistance and electrical insulating properties. PCBs are also used in such products as lubricants, waterproofing chemicals and some sorts of duplicating paper.

But PCBs are known to have caused a disfiguring skin disease and liver ailments in humans — white rats fed these chemicals have developed liver cancer. There is also strong evidence to suggest PCBs may harm some wildlife and may even threaten the entire ecological food chain all the way down to man the ultimate consumer. And PCBs are even more resistant than DDT to degradation by natural forces. In some parts of the industrialized world, the accumulation of PCBs in the environment already has exceeded that of DDT.

Yet in the face of mounting evidence that PCBs are dangerous, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has moved with all the speed of a glacier in the Antarctic. There has been a sort of voluntary controls program since 1972 when a federal task force urged that the use of PCBs be restricted. Thereupon the sole U.S. producer, Monsanto Co., voluntarily cut off sales to all its customers except users with "closed systems" electrical applications, or those less likely to spill the chemicals into waterways or burn trash contaminated by them.

Voluntary controls, however, haven't remedied the situation for two main reasons. One is that a lot of Monsanto's ex-customers can still get the chemicals in Europe. The other is the persistence of PCBs in the environment. The EPA has had authority since 1972 to set effluent limitations for PCBs, but hasn't done so. Consequently, users have been free to pollute if they felt like it. Apparently some have felt like it regularly.

No doubt one reason for the EPA's inaction in this field was the argument of some manufacturers of electrical equipment that there is no satisfactory substitute for PCBs in electrical gear, at least as the equipment is now designed. But the Dow Corning Corp. claims to have developed a workable substitute in polydimethyl siloxane. In any case many scientists now seem to think the risks to the public from PCBs outweigh the risks of possible transformer fires and explosions.

And at last there are signs the EPA is ready to move. Agency officials have promised to set effluent restrictions for PCBs, aimed at stopping industrial polluters, next February. Furthermore the EPA is renewing its efforts to get Congress to pass the proposed Toxic Substances Control Act. That would strengthen the agency's powers to curb pollution. The big question is whether Congress is ready to act; the nation's leading polluters have powerful friends in both houses.

Yet to point to industry as the sole villain in the case is to evade the issue. Industry in this country tries to supply the people — at a profit, to be sure — with the products and comforts they demand. And if it's a question of preserving the natural environment or reducing their material wants and comforts, the attitude of most Americans has been "full speed ahead and damn the pollutants." The consumer himself will have to lead the way if we are ever going to clean up the air and the waterways of the U. S. And if we don't, pollution will eventually settle the issue by cleaning us all out.

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