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PCBs

Polychlorinated biphenyls are now a national issue of utmost concern. This point became evident to an alarming degree at the National Conference on PCBs held November 19–21 in Chicago. The conference, sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, gave no cause for cheer when Thomas E. Kopp, an EPA chemist, said that 10 million pounds of PCBs contaminate the environment each year "through vaporization, leaks, and spills."

Kopp was one of 400 scientists, state and federal bureaucrats, environmentalists, and fishermen who attended the conference, which was opened by EPA Administrator Russell E. Train. Train said that PCBs "are present in our environment to a far greater degree and at higher levels than we have previously thought." Talking later with reporters, Train said that PCBs are present in the drinking water supplies of Winnebago, Illinois, and Sellersburg, Indiana, and are suspected in the water supplies of New Bedford, Massachusetts, Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Escondido, California. For all this and more, Train was reluctant to order individual factories to stop releasing PCBs under Section 504 of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act. This section authorizes EPA to sue to restrain pollution of waters causing "substantial endangerment to the health of persons, or to the welfare of persons, where such endangerment is to the livelihood of such persons."

There was ample evidence presented in Chicago to show that PCBs are a menace to public health, and it was obvious that PCBs have affected livelihoods. As Mrs. Jean Hermes said, "Hardships are already being inflicted on families because of PCB poisoning of our waters. We are fourth-generation commercial fishermen out of Green Bay, Wisconsin. We have four children and have had our livelihood taken away because of high levels of PCBs in the Green Bay waters. This year the Food and Drug Administration shut down our business when fish tested from our nets measured 54 ppm of PCBs."

The Food and Drug Administration has a "tolerance" level of five parts per million of PCBs in fish destined for human consumption, and that level may be far too high. Canadian authorities recently lowered PCB levels in edible fish parts to two ppm.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regards the presence of only 0.5 ppm of PCBs in a fish egg as indication of trouble, and the conference concluded with a blunt speech by Nathaniel P. Reed, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. "I am shocked by the pervasiveness of PCBs; they are literally everywhere. And I am troubled by the exceedingly high levels found in fish from all our drainage systems, and I do not mean just the Hudson and the entire Great Lakes system, but the Merrimack and Connecticut rivers of the Atlantic Coast, the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio rivers of the Midwest, the Columbia River system in the Northwest, the Sacramento in the West, the Rio Grande River and other Gulf Coast streams, and even the Yukon in Alaska!"

Reed called for the elimination of all sources of PCBs in the United States within three years, and he ended his speech with rights to the jaws of EPA and FDA. "Quite frankly," he said, "I am thoroughly disgusted by the gnashing of teeth, wailing, and rubbing of hands. To the agencies which have the enforcement responsibilities, a word on behalf of the bewildered and concerned American people: *Get on with it!*"

Reed did not pussyfoot when questioned by the press. "While we are poisoning ourselves, we're hassling over whether the Federal Water Pollution Control Act gives the EPA administrator the right to save our lives."

Dow Chemical Company later announced plans to market a new insulating fluid to replace PCBs in high-voltage power capacitors, which account for one-fifth of PCB use. Dow claims the new product is environmentally safe and would have a "far lower potential impact" than PCBs, now produced solely by Monsanto Corporation.

(See "Of PCB ppms from GE and a SNAFU from EPA and DEC" by Robert H. Boyle, AUDUBON, November 1975.)

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