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E.P.A. Bans Discharge of PCB's Directly Into the Nation's Waters

By BAYARD WEBSTER

The Environmental Protection Agency yesterday ordered the ban of the direct discharge of PCB's, a highly toxic industrial chemical, into United States waters.

The chemical, a close relative of DDT, has been found in scientific studies to cause deformities in fetuses, changes in liver function, nervous disorders and cancers in animals. Widespread in the environment, it is found in almost all major bodies of water in the world. Significant amounts have also been monitored in the air.

The ban follows results of recent studies that show that its levels in water and fish exceed by several factors those standards set by the E.P.A. and the Food and Drug Administration.

The only plants covered by the ban are some 20 factories that manufacture electrical transformers and capacitors and discharge their PCB's, used in electrical insulation, into bodies of water.

The E.P.A. noted in announcing the ban late yesterday that "past widespread use of the chemicals in the production of lubricant additives, hydraulic and compressor fluid, carbonless copy paper, plasticizers, paints and other products has resulted in PCB's being present throughout the environment.

"Although most of these uses have now been substantially curtailed, PCB's which have entered the environment cannot in most cases be recovered and will require many years to degrade. The public will be alerted to potential hazards by careful long-term monitoring of PCB levels in food."

One of the most prominent PCB contamination cases involved the General Electric Company, which had been dumping its PCB wastes into the Hudson River, causing fish to accumulate many times the permissible level of the chemical. A negotiated settlement between the company and the State Department of Environmental Conservation resulted in G.E.'s agreeing to cease its dumping and to pay $3 million toward cleansing the river and $1 million for research toward ending the problem.

The ban did not cover the PCB wastes of transformer plants that discharge their wastes into municipal sewage systems. Such "indirect" discharges, the E.P.A. said, would be taken care of by additional regulations being prepared by the environmental agency.

The ruling, which in effect calls for the zero discharge of PCB's into main bodies of water, follows the recent studies that indicated that the recently proposed permissible standard of one part per billion of PCB's in transformer plant waste waters could not be met.

"The present problem of PCB contamination in the environment is so severe that in many waters throughout the United States PCB loads are already in excess of the criteria," E.P.A. Administrator Russell E. Train said in announcing the ban. His action came on the final day under the law for a decision in the PCB case, which had been argued most prominently by the Environmental Defense Fund, a Washington-based environmental law firm principally responsible for the banning of DDT in 1972.

The industrial chemical is widely used for insulating electrical equipment, in the recycling of wastepaper and in metal casting plants. Because of its widespread distribution in the environment, its resistance to biological degradation with a half-life of more than 20 years, PCB's are considered one of the most serious of the many environmental contamination problems prevalent today.

Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Company, the only American maker of the chemical, announced several months ago that it would quit production of the substance by October 31 of this year. There are no restrictions on the importation of PCB's. The Food and Drug Administration has already banned use of the chemical in the processing of food and feed, where it was sometimes used as cloth and paper insulation in containers and cartons.

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