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How It Gets There a Mystery

Limits Due on PCB in Foods

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WASHINGTON — Government safety levels eventually will be set for foods containing polychlorinated biphenyls, which threaten to become a major environmental pollutant.



That's the opinion of Dr. Henry Fishback, director of the Food and Drug Administration division of pesticides.

He and other federal scientists since the first of the year have been warning that the chemical-called PCB for short-is turning up in the nation's air and water in a constantly increasing volume.

They say it may be more of a hazard to humans and wildlife than the controversial DDT pesticide.

"PCB over the long haul may be the greatest problem compound we have," says Dr. Joseph P. Linduska, associate director of the Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife.

"It may be the greatest problem of the chemical age," he says.

Dr. Fishback believes the time is coming soon when states may be forced into establishing PCB safety levels for foods. If they don't, it is likely the federal government will step in, he says.

But first, government scientists have to find out how much PCB is entering the environment and how it gets there.

The same puzzle confronts the Monsanto Chemical Co. of St. Louis, the sole U.S. manufacturer of PCB. The chemical also is produced in Europe and Japan.

Despite company disclaimers, Dr. Fishbsck says the chemical is being widely used in industry as an additive to plastic products, printing inks, paints, adhesives and sealants. It also is used as a fluid insulator against electricity in power transformers.

According to Dr. Fishback, Monsanto so far has declined to reveal how much PCB it produces and markets under the trade name of Aroclor.

A commerce department official explained that Monsanto, as sole maker of the chemical in this country, doesn't have to file production reports with the department.

According to unofficial estimates, hundreds of millions of pounds of the chemical are produced annually in the United States.

Dr. Harold Price, an analytical chemist in charge of the Michigan State Pesticide Laboratory, says PCB appears to be almost as prevalent in the environment as DDT, on which controls have been applied.

PCB is a petroleum derivative of beazene and its molecular structure is almost identical to that of DDT. Also like DDT, it has long-lasting resistance to breakdown and is relatively insoluble in water.

PCB has been found to be toxic to fish and other marine life and to birds and animals. Its possible long-range effect upon man has not been determined.

And no one knows for sure how PCB is being picked up in the human food chain.

Dr. Fishback believes considerable PCB gets into the air and water as products to which it has been added decompose and oxidize after they have been discarded into, for example, a sanitary landfill.