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Monsanto Imposes Controls on Pollutant

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WASHINGTON—The sole U.S. manufacturer of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) announces that it is taking voluntary action to restrict use of the chemical.

Government researchers have said PCB may be a major environmental pollutant.

Howard L. Minckler, vice president and general manager of the organic chemicals division of Monsanto Co., St. Louis, Mo., said the company's action has been "completely ignored" in recent political charges and "sensational" newspaper headlines.

Minckler said:

"Monsanto has not been pressured by any legislation or organized group.

"We have taken decisive action, including laboratory studies, based on evidence that PCB is a persistent chemical which builds up in the environment."

Dr. Joseph Linduska, associate director of the U.S. Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife, recently said: "PCB over the long haul may be the greatest problem compound we have. It may be the greatest problem of the chemical age."

Researchers have been puzzled because the molecules of PCB under microscope are similar to those of the pesticide DDT, which has been tagged as being harmful to humans and wildlife.

Many states, including Michigan, have banned the use of DDT.

Questions in the minds of researchers are: Have they been mistaking one chemical for the other? And, if so, have their DDT counts in various food samples been erroneous?

Monsanto to date has declined to reveal to the U.S. Department of Commerce the number of products it sells containing PCB. However, the company now says it will make a full report after its studies are completed.

"Our program began back in 1968 with the proper identification and measurement of PCB in the environment. It will conclude this year by our unilateral action to restrict its use," Minckler said.

Recent reports indicate that PCB causes birth defects in animals. Minckler said in rebuttal: "Monsanto is not aware of any scientific data that concludes polychlorinated biphenyls may cause birth defects.

"The results of comprehensive toxicity studies, sponsored by Monsanto and using the usual species of laboratory animals, have failed to produce such effects."

Minckler said "scare tactics and sensational reporting do not serve the public interest nor solve ecological problems."

He said only a few reports have stated why PCB was developed and how it is used in industrial processes. The consequences of not using PCB have not been explained, he said.

The chemical was developed more than 40 years ago, primarily as a coolant in electrical transformers as a cool capacitors because it does not conduct electricity.

Minckler said PCB is not a "household item."

"Anyone who lives in a large city is familiar with power failures," he said. "During peak power needs, air conditioning and refrigeration fail, lights go out and commuters are stranded. If power companies were to remove PCB from equipment, we have been told major blackouts would occur throughout the world."

Minckler said PCB is used in electrical equipment as a safety fluid, adding it has "replaced combustible oil products which have on many occasions exploded and burned, causing deaths and injury."

He said state and local laws throughout the nation require the use of nonflammable fluids in certain electrical equipment.

"At the moment there are no substitutes available which equal the safety performance of PCB," Minckler declared.

Monsanto said it intends to continue selling PCB for "closed system" uses, such as electrical components and heat transfer systems.

"With rigid control over where the product goes, how it is handled and disposed of, we believe the safety functions of the product can continue to serve society and the environment can be protected," Minckler said.

"We are discontinuing sales for open systems," he said. These include adhesives, sealants, chlorinated rubber, specialty paints and similar industrial products.

Minckler said that for other uses, such as fire-resistant hydraulic fluids, where PCB cannot be strictly controlled, "we have reformulated other fluids and they are on the market."

The new products contain other fire-resistant ingredients.

"We will continue to develop alternate formulas which do not contain persistent PCB—we will not abandon hydraulic fluid users," Minckler said.

As a further safeguard to the environment, he said Monsanto has developed a new system for disposal or recycling of spent PCB and the firm also regenerates spent fluids to be reused.

The firm has come up with a special high-temperature incinerator to break down PCB into harmless materials. The incinerator will be offered to customers who cannot otherwise destroy or regenerate their used fluids.

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