PCBs taint fish

The Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR) late last month discovered record-high levels of poisonous polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in fish taken from the Sheboygan River and two of its tributaries. Meanwhile, the federal Environmental Protection Agency was scrambling to find appropriate sites for PCB disposal now that a recently enacted federal law has severely restricted dumping of the compounds.

In Wisconsin, concentrations of PCBs in five carp from the Sheboygan averaged 750 parts per million, compared with the previous record high of 350 ppm. found in fish taken below General Electric's capacitor plant on the Hudson River. DNR officials posted warnings against eating fish caught in a total of 129 miles of the Sheboygan and its tributaries. "At the levels the fish are accumulating PCBs, it's an extremely serious problem," says Karl E. Bremer, toxic substances coordinator for EPA's regional office in Chicago.

Bremer notes that there is a "strong possibility" the PCBs came from hydraulic oil that leaked from equipment used by metal casting firms in the Sheboygan area. He added that because bottom-feeding fish have shown the highest concentration of the pollutant, it is probably building in river sediments where fish eat.

New federal regulations (effective Apr. 18) that prohibit PCB disposal anywhere but at an authorized disposal site have EPA regional offices struggling to find appropriate sites. "There are still no approved sites in the country," says Matthew Strauss, an EPA environmental engineer.

The new regulations, which spell out specifications for PCB disposal in landfills and incinerators, give the agency's regional offices authority to approve sites. "The regions have received a lot of applications," Strauss explains, but he notes that officials have to weigh a variety of criteria in their decisions, including community acceptance, which is an often powerful obstacle. Nevertheless, he predicts a site will be approved by the end of the month and speculates it will be a landfill rather than an incinerator.

Until then, however, PCB disposal is prohibited in the U.S. and PCB handlers must store their wastes until dumping sites become available. Yet, federal regulations covering requirements for PCB storage containers do not become effective until July, meaning, Strauss says, that handlers can store them in anything. EPA is concerned that the lag in the federal rules could "lead to faulty storage or accidental disposal," he notes, "which is why we want to approve a site as soon as possible." But if stored PCBs leak and get into the environment, Strauss warns, "that's disposal and that's illegal," so it is in a company's best interest to store them in adequate containers.

Going it alone

The Chemical Specialties Manufacturers Assn. (Washington, D.C.) believes it may be able to lower product-liability insurance costs for members by forming a captive insurance company in Bermuda by May 15. The carrier would underwrite coverage for members who join the program.

CSMA worked with reinsurance firm Fred S. James (New York) to develop rates from an actuarial study based on 49 questionnaires from a survey of members.

CSMA plans to charge $6/$1,000 of sales for all size companies. This compares to rates estimated by the study to be in effect now: $6.13/$1,000 of sales for companies with sales of up to $5 million; $5.75/$1,000 of sales for those with sales of $5-10 million; and $4.01/$1,000 of sales for firms with sales of $10-50 million.

Each CSMA policyholder would have a $2,500 deductible for each claim.

Among the study's findings: that 21 members dropped product-liability coverage within the past three years, and that many companies had trouble getting casualty or loss statistics from broker-agents or insurance companies.

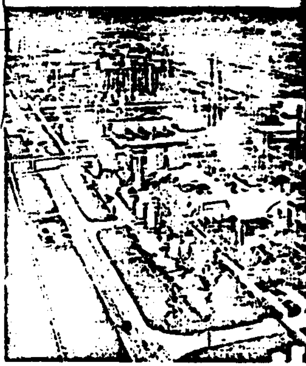
Several bills dealing with aspects of the product-liability insurance problem are still pending in Congress. A federal study did not find the situation to be a crisis (*CW, Nov. 9, 1977, p. 23*).

Dow Badische expands

Now that BASF has agreed to acquire full ownership of Dow Badische, its 50-50 joint venture with Dow Chemical, the subsidiary will figure heavily in the German chemical producer's plans for growth in the U.S.

BASF said last week that it plans to construct a 130-million-lbs./year acrylic acid plant at Dow Badische's Freeport, Tex., complex. The facility, estimated to cost $40 million, will use BASF's new propylene oxidation process. Engineering will start immediately, with completion scheduled for second-half 1981.

In addition, BASF Wyandotte disclosed plans to build a 6,000-metric-tons/year



DOW BADISCHE's Freeport, Tex., complex, where BASF plans acrylic acid expansion.

tetrahydrofuran (THF) production unit at Geismar, La., for completion in mid-1980. THF is used in making polyvinyl chloride and urethane coatings, recording tape, cellophane, tetramethyl lead and drugs. The company now supplies the U.S. market from its Houston facility. BASF Wyandotte is also building a $70-million agricultural chemical complex at Geismar that will initially produce the firms' Basagran herbicide. Construction of a unit for manufacture of MDI, a urethane component, is also scheduled for the site.

BASF's investments in North America will gain the company more than $2 billion in sales on this continent by 1982, Chairman Matthias Seefelder predicted last week. Last year's sales in North America totaled $1.2 billion. To achieve this growth, Seefelder said, "we have adopted a five-year capital expenditure program calling for outlays of altogether $700 million," much of which will be devoted to Dow Badische operations. BASF's 100% ownership of that company will broaden the German producer's chemical business and earnings potential in North America, the company said.

Dow Badische, which manufactures man-made fibers and yarns as well as numerous chemicals for the fibers business, was founded by Dow and BASF in 1958. Dow Chemical's equity share of the venture "has not been material" in the past few years, averaging less than 1¢/share in 1977, the company said. The transaction should have no effect on second-quarter profits, Dow added. BASF officials said they plan to retain the Dow Badische name for a year or so until they choose a replacement.