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Monsanto to stop PCB line

Monsanto Co. announced today that it will stop manufacturing polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), a dielectric insulating fluid, which contains properties that have been accumulating in the environment.

Earle H. Harbison Jr., general manager of Monsanto's Specialty Chemicals Division, said the PCB products have been manufactured since 1929 in the company's William G. Krummrich plant in Sauget. Harbison said the company will halt the manufacture of PCB, complete the distribution of all inventories and withdraw from the market by Oct. 31, 1977.

Monsanto officials said this will mean the loss of 20 jobs at the Sauget plant, but there will be no layoffs. Employees in those jobs will be absorbed elsewhere in the plant's 1,300 jobs.

PCB products are fire-resistant, which has made their use in the electrical business important over the years. Harbison said that fire resistant PCB-filled capacitors not only fail infrequently, but also fail safely. A violent failure of a device containing a flammable fluid could result in fire and explosion.

"Fire resistant, PCB-filled transformers are used in certain indoor installations such as high rise buildings, hospitals and schools and in electrically-powered urban commuter trains," Harbison said. "PCB-containing capacitors are used to control voltage and reduce power losses in fluorescent and mercury lights, AC motors, air conditioning compressors and television receivers."

Unfortunately, Harbison said, the properties that have made PCB products fire-resistant are the same properties that are accumulating in the environment. This was discovered in the early 1970s.

At that time, Monsanto cut back production and made PCB products which would be contained in closed or sealed systems. This reduced production by 50 per cent.

Since that time, Harbison said, PCB levels monitored in major water basins have decreased.

"Despite these positive results, it became apparent that the persistent nature of these compounds was being perceived by society as a greater risk than that presented by using less fire resistant fluids in electrical apparatus.

"It was at this point that Monsanto made the decision to eventually phase out PCB production for even these sealed dielectric uses," Harbison said.

He said the electrical industry has been conducting studies to find a replacement for PCB products.

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