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News Analysis

Solutions of PCBs Problem Still Remains a Knotty One

By DAVID LEONARD

Although last week's international PCBs conference increased understanding concerning the dimensions of the complex PCBs problem—questions concerning solutions to the problem remain as big as ever.

The responsibility for detecting and then controling toxic PCBs has been passed back and forth between state and federal environmental agencies, according to Michael W. Duttweiler, extension specialist for the Oswego office of Sea Grant Advisory Service.

After attending the three-day conference in Chicago, which was sponsored by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, Duttweiler says he feels the impetus for solving the PCBs problem must come from local and state agencies with federal support.

He said the sources of PCB discharges and possible substitutes for PCB uses must be found. Duttweiler said, however, that the PCBs problem is a complex one.

Much Debate

There is presently much debate over how much power environmental agencies have regarding the PCBs problem, according to Duttweiler. He said some groups at the conference said the PCBs problem could be controlled if the EPA and state agencies fully enforced existing laws.

But he said an EPA official replied that it needs the passage of the Toxic Substances Control Act to clean up PBCs. "They feel this would give them the ability to control imports and direct use of PCBs," said Duttweiler. He said now the EPA can only act indirectly—by using the power invested in it through the Water Pollution Control Act.

The agencies rebutted critism about their alleged inaction by saying they had been doing what they could, given the present legislation and manpower limitation,s according to Duttweiler.

At the PCBs conference authorities said the northeastern U.S. and Ontario appear to be PCB 'hotspots', but that the PCB problem is widespread.

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are a group of chemical compounds similar in construction to DDT, and used in a variety of manufacturing processes—particularly for capacitors and transformers.

One EPA official at the conference estimated that 10 million pounds of PCBs are lost to the environment each year worldwide. Through vaporization, leaks and spills.

At the conference Duttweiler learned that although much of the publicity has been over PCBs found in lake trout and salmon and in the water, PCBs are also entered into the environment through the atmosphere.

PCBs enter bodies of water through precipitation, direct discharges and through sewage systems. Duttweiler said PCBs may also be leached out of contaminated materials at landfills.

Need High Temperatures

PCBs are long-lived and highly resistant to heat—so that to destroy them extremely high temperatures are necessary. According to Duttweiler, one source of PCBs might be through the smokestacks of incinerators which burn at temperatures lower than what is needed to break down PCBs.

The fact that PCBs are so resistant to heat is seen by industriallists as an asset, because fire hazards are reduced. One of the problems with substitutes which have been developed, according to Duttweiler, is that they are more flammable than PCBs. The fire risk is being weighed against the other risks, he said.

The PCBs problem came to the forefront locally when in August Ogden Reid, commissioner of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, issued a warning against consuming striped bass from the Hudson River. He soon thereafter extended his advisory to include salmon and lake trout from Lake Ontario.

Reason for the warning: substantial number of fish had been found with PCBs in their flesh at concentrations above the 5 parts per million maximum established by the Federal Food and Drug Administration.

Reid's action against General Electric Corp., which had been named by the DEC as a major source of PCBs on the Hudson, won him praise by EPA officials, according to Duttweiler.

Major Task

Locating the PCB users will be a major task. Dealing with the problem after the sources have been found will be another major task.

Seeing that PCBs are destroyed properly after they are used will be another necessity.

Michigan was forced to deal with the PCBs problem several years ago. Lake Michigan salmon were found to have levels above the 5 ppm limit. Duttweiler said reports given at the conference last week indicated that the levels haven't gone down there and that they may even have gone up.

Nathaniel P. Reed, assistant secretary of the interior, said the PCBs problem is threatening fish restocking programs in the Great Lakes, according to an Associated Press report.

This year, according to the AP report, federal and local governments will spend $80 million on the Great Lakes restocking program and have spent more than $175 million in the past 17 years to reestablish the fisheries decimated by the sea lamprey, he said.

Stock Millions of Fish

More than 100 million lake trout, splake and various salmon have been reintroduced as well as millions of rainbow, brook and brown trout. Sport fishermen alone contribute about $360 million annually to the economy of the Great Lakes states and Ontario, Reed said, according to AP.

The industry is expected to peak here in several years. It is expected to boost the area's economy by $8 million annually.

Papers given at the conference indicated that more and more is being learned about the possible health effects of PCBs, said Duttweiler.

Good Model

"One of the most significant findings reported at the conference was that rhesus monkeys fed PCBs at level known to have produced health problems in humans exhibited the same symptoms as did the humans," he said. "This means that rhesus monkeys are in fact a good 'model' for testing the effects of PCBs on humans. Research can now continue using smaller and smaller doses to evulate possible effects of occasional consuption of PCB-contaminated foods by humans."

In tests on laboratory animals PCBs have produced skin lesions, reduced reproductive rates and liver problems. One study correlates PCBs with liver cancer in rats.

PCBs accumulate in tissues and have an affinity to fat.

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