Another Chemical Joins Mercury As Threat To State Environment

While we're still awaiting a solution to the mercury pollution problem up pops another possible threat to parts of the Alabama environment. It is a chemical substance manufactured by Monsanto which has plants at Anniston and St. Louis.

The substance, called PCB, is said to be threatening the reproduction of birds and is also suspected of being harmful to human beings and animals. Naturally, the big concern is whether or not fish in the Coosa River have been contaminated by PCB.

The threat of PCB was outlined by Congressman William F. Ryan of New York, during a press conference held in New York City recently, and given wide coverage by the St. Louis Globe-Democrat. He described the substance a threat to the environment perhaps as great as DDT.

"I am calling for immediate action to prevent what may be a major ecological disaster," said Ryan.

He asked for federal authorities to set limits on PCB in food products and to ban it entirely from pesticides.

The St. Louis paper said Monsanto officials responded in a prepared statement that they are "well aware of the concern" over PCB. They said steps have been taken to strictly control its use and to replace harmful grades of PCB that linger in nature.

PCB stands for "polychlorinated biphenyl" which is used as a "plasticizer" in a wide variety of products. Monsanto is the only manufacturer in the United States.

Ryan said research indicates that PCB can have "a disastrous effect on human beings."

"If inhaled, PCB can cause nausea, rapid breathing, loss of weight and a lowered red blood cell count," said Ryan.

"More serious results are the deterioration of the kidneys, jaundice and atrophy of the liver. In sufficient quantities, PCB can cause death," Ryan added.

"The incredible thing about the PCB menace is that its effects on man and animal have long been documented by chemists and biologists," he said.

The trade name used by Monsanto for its PCB products is "Aroclor."

Although Ryan said the product is used for many household items, Monsanto said it is not a household product.

Monsanto said it is used mainly in electrical applications

OUTDOORS WITH SAM ADAMS

where the chemical performs as an insulating fluid.

"We have and will continue to cooperate fully with government agencies investigating this problem," Monsanto said in its prepared statement.

The firm noted that alternate products will be introduced later this year for the grades of PCB which degrade slowly.

Meanwhile, Dr. Robert Risebrough, of the University of California at Berkeley said PCB has found its way into fish, sea birds, human fats and human mothers' milk.

—Used In Household Products

He said PCBs are used in many household products such as waxes, and floor tiles, and also brake-linings, plastics and adhesives.

However, we hasten to point out PCBs are produced in other parts of the world, which could account for some of its household use in the United States.

Even so, tests are being made to determine if PCB is reaching public streams through waste materials discharged by Monsanto at Anniston. The plant's waste is piped to the Choccolocco Creek 12 miles from the Coosa. Fish samples have been picked up from both streams and a laboratory report is awaited. Let's hope the report is negative.

With four and half months remaining in the year, Alabama stands a good chance of having an even larger fish kill by pollution than it did in leading the nation in 1969. The toll that year was between five and six million. But already the figure for 1970 is approaching the five million mark. And slightly more than four million of the fish killed this year was caused by an overloaded Mobile sewage treatment plant on Eslava Creek.

The sewage plant overflowed in May, resulting in a low dissolved oxygen content and the death of an estimated 3,240,000 fish. Another 800,000 fish suffered the same fate in Eslava Creek in July.

This makes us wonder why the City of Mobile qualifies for a dumping permit under the 1899 Federal Refuse Act. Maybe the U.S. Corps of Engineers has an answer. After all, Eslava Creek and Dog River, scenes of frequent fish kills due to sewage are tributaries of a navigable water.

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