

15A-15 CHEMICAL WEEK
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Why PCBs lost out

PCB fluids (askarels) came into use in the electrical industry in 1929, as dielectric insulating fluids with fire-resistant properties. On certain installations, they replaced hydrocarbon mineral oil, which is flammable. Mineral oil is still used in many applications. It is well-suited for filling transformers in rural areas, for example, but might prove hazardous if the installation is near schools, hospitals, subway systems and other populated areas.

The askarels are nonflammable, long-lasting and inert—ironically, the properties that caused their downfall. Records of Monsanto, the only U.S. producer, show that before 1971, production was 85 million lbs./year, which went to thousands of customers (e.g., for lubricants, carbonless carbon paper, adhesives, surface coatings).

By 1971, however, research had indicated the persistence of PCBs and the company began phasing out sales for open applications. Sales were cut to 45 million lbs./year.

From 1971 to 1976, Monsanto reports, average production was 27 million lbs./year, with sales to fewer than 40 customers, all manufacturers of sealed electrical equipment. Even those uses seemed to offer potential hazards, however, and indications of adverse health effects—possibly causing cancer, birth defects, and liver, nerve and skin damage in humans—sealed PCBs' fate. Monsanto halted production in July 1977.

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