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Despite voluntary curtailment of production of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's), every waterway in the nation is now assumed to be contaminated with traces of these industrial chemicals, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nathaniel P. Reed reported recently. Structurally similar to DDT, PCB's are used in "closed cycle" systems such as capacitors and transformers.

PCB residues have been discovered in fish samples from monitoring stations on 100 different river systems across the United States, Reed told a three-day Chicago conference on PCB toxicity. In addition, he said, a $175 million campaign to restock the Great Lakes with fish is in jeopardy for two reasons: the fish are unfit to eat because of PCB contamination, and they cannot reproduce.

Reed said that alternatives to the use of PCB's must be found so that the chemicals can be eliminated completely from industrial use, and hopefully from the environment as well.

The Food and Drug Administration now allows a PCB level of five parts per million in fish considered safe to eat, but is studying the possibility of lowering that limit. The Canadian government recently set the limit at two ppm.

PCB's, which have been used in manufacturing processes since 1930, enter the environment when industrial and municipal wastes are buried or released from sewage treatment plants. They also leak into the environment from dumps. According to an Environmental Protection Agency spokesman, at least 10 plants in the U.S. dump PCB's directly into waterways. The chemicals have caused liver cancer and reproductive failures in laboratory animals. In addition, some workers exposed to PCB's have complained of allergic dermatitis, nausea, dizziness, eye and nasal irritation, asthmatic bronchitis and fungus infections. //

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