Germ eats pollutants

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Canadian government research scientist has isolated a new strain of bacteria with a hearty appetite for one of the most persistent worldwide environmental pollutants — polychlorinated biphenyls PCBs.

Dr. Dickson Liu of the Canada Center for Inland Waters in Burlington, Ontario, says the bacteria — a variety of common bacteria found in sewage — have been shown to reduce PCB concentrations in laboratory solutions from 300,000 parts per billion to less than 20 ppb in about a week.

Liu, who has been researching methods for treating toxic, insoluble substances in sewage for several years, says the bacteria are not of a disease producing type. He says the bacteria break down PCBs into harmless carbon dioxide gas and lightweight organic acids which are normally found in nature.

"We introduce the bacteria into PCB-contaminated sewage which has been emulsified (broken into tiny particles) with ultrasonic sound and a chemical called lignin sulfonate," Liu said in a telephone interview. "The bacteria then thrive on the tiny particles of PCBs."

PCBs, which are valued for their low flammability and insulation properties, have been used since the 1930s in a wide variety of electrical products including transformers and fluorescent lights as well as in various types of inks, paints and "carbonless" carbon paper.

The compounds are chemical cousins of DDT and have been implicated in birth defects in Japan. In the United States, PCB contamination has been responsible for the closing of the Hudson River to New York state's commercial fishermen this year.

MONS 036001