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Find high cancer rate among PCB workers

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Monsanto Co. reports a preliminary study has found a higher than normal incidence of lung cancer among deceased workers who were once employed in its plant that produces polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

However, said Dr. George Roush, director of the company's medical and environmental health department, there is no indication that the presence of the disease was related to PCBs.

Roush also said the study has shown no cases of malignant melanoma or pancreatic cancer among current or former employes of the unit.

Roush said study results also have shown that workers in the PCB unit lived longer than the national average.

Roush said the lung cancer findings were based on "raw information" and require a controlled study. Monsanto said it expects to complete its investigation in 12 to 18 months.

The Monsanto information, disclosed in a news release, was based on a review of the records of more than 300 current and former employes at its sole PCB production unit at Sauget, Ill., since 1936.

PCBs, fire-resistant chemicals used mainly as insulating fluids in electrical equipment such as high-power transformers, have been termed a significant health hazard by the Environmental Protection Agency. They have been shown to cause reproductive failures, gastric disorders and skin lesions in mammals.

Monsanto, the only American manufacturer of PCBs, announced in January it intends to phase out production of the chemical.

A recent Mobil Oil Corp. study reported finding three cases of melanoma and two cases of pancreatic cancer among 72 employes who had been exposed to a PCB product while working at a Mobil plant in New Jersey, Monsanto said.

Roush said the absence of the malignancies in Monsanto's study at the Sauget plant "casts strong doubt that the findings of the Mobil study were in fact related to PCB."

Regarding the lung cancer findings, Roush said Monsanto has been able to identify 50 former employes at Sauget who have died and that seven of these persons had lung cancer.

This compares with 2.7 cases that would would have been expected based on a study of U.S. male population for the year 1969 compiled by the National Cancer Institute, Roush said.

Three of the seven workers who died of lung cancer worked in the PCB unit for less than three months, he said.

Officials for the EPA have said PCB levels above those allowed by the Food and Drug Administration have been found in fish from the Great Lakes, the Hudson River, the upper Mississippi and off the Southern California coast.