THE NATIONAL OBSERVER

Week Ending October 9, 1976

A CHEMICAL BAN'S EFFECTS

...How the Absence of PCBs may alter your life.

By Mark R. Arnold
FROM WASHINGTON, D.C.

If you work in an office building, you may notice workmen refitting the fluorescent lighting fixtures over the next couple of years, maybe even putting in new fixtures. Churches, schools, and hospitals may need new, larger electric power transformers, or may have to rebuild old ones, and sprinkler systems will have to be installed to guard against a greater risk of fire.

Some experts think these results can be expected from a ban on the manufacture of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs. The ban, to take effect in 1979, is included in the Toxic Substances Control Act, which President Ford is expected to sign. The experts also believe that consumers will ultimately pay the $100 to $200 million a year in extra costs that the act will impose on industry.

The bill gives the Government new powers to prevent the marketing of potentially harmful substances among the 1,000 new chemical compounds offered for sale each year (The Observer, April 10, 1976), but it singles out PCBs for special treatment.

The only U.S. PCB manufacturer, the Monsanto Co., plans to phase out production next year, and industrial users of the chemicals have long searched for a substitute.

PCBs were once used in hundreds of commercial processes, such as printing inks and bendable plastics, but evidence mounted that it could cause cancer: PCBs discharged into the streams and rivers get into the food chain. So in 1972 the Government restricted its uses to "closed" systems, such as industrial machinery. Its only uses now are as a fire-resistant insulating fluid in capacitors, which provide the surge of power that activates fluorescent lights, air conditioners, and television sets, and in transformers used to regulate the power flow into homes, businesses, and even electrified commuter railroad cars.

General Electric Co., one of Monsanto's two major customers (the other is Westinghouse Electric), plans to substitute silicone for PCBs in the transformers it produces, beginning next July. But despite tests of more than 100 liquids, it has yet to find a substance that can match PCBs' safety and fire-resistant qualities for use in capacitors. "There is no total substitute for PCBs," says a GE spokesman.

The bill doesn't require the replacement of PCB fluids in existing machinery, but as equipment wears out, new insulating materials will have to be substituted. A Monsanto official says that without a technological breakthrough, transformers made without PCBs will have to be larger, and often enclosed in firewalls or supplemented by sprinkler systems to meet fire-insurance, building-code, and other safety standards.

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F.Y.I. -- The attached very favorable article concerning the effects PCBs' replacement appears in the current issue of the National Observer.

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