The Oregonian
PORTLAND, OREGON
D. 245,132 SUN. 407,188

JAN 30 1976

Officials ask for ban on chemical

By ROBERT SIGNER
Chicago Daily News Service

WASHINGTON — Two federal officials have asked Congress to pass laws giving them the authority to ban the chemical PCB, which they say is a hazard to health and the environment.

"No matter how painful the solution may be, I support a national ban on all domestic and imported PCBs," said Nathaniel P. Reed, assistant secretary of the Department of the Interior.

Reed and Russell Train, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, were the first two witnesses at hearings called by a House Fisheries and Wildlife subcommittee on the recently recognized dangers of PCB.

Train, who announced EPA rules in December designed to cut down on PCB use, said his authority is limited by existing law. He told the subcommittee that all of the toxic substance control bills before Congress "would greatly strengthen our hand in beginning to control the problem of toxic substances entering the environment," including PCB.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are used in the manufacture of capacitors, transformers and other industrial products in the United States and other countries. They are similar to DDT in chemical construction and not readily biodegradable.

State and federal laboratory tests have linked PCBs to a variety of human illnesses, from skin lesions to miscarriages. In a broader sense, they affect the chain of life, first contaminating basic foods and then invading human body fat.

Reed, assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks, testified that PCBs affect the fetuses of pregnant women and can cause headaches, swelling of the eyelids, temporary loss of vision and other problems.

Environmental groups and many members of Congress have been urging the EPA and the Food and Drug Administration to ban PCBs.

The EPA has said its authority is limited. The FDA does set maximun safety levels for various foods or grains that will end up in food-producing animals, but the critics point out that other countries' restrictions are tighter than the FDA's.

The FDA sets a maximum level of 4 parts per million of PCB in fish, for example. But Canada's limit in fish is half that.

The FDA is reviewing the latest toxicological information on PCBs, but no immediate decision to reduce the permissible levels is in sight. Both Reed and Train noted that Lake Michigan, the most severely contaminated of the Great Lakes in terms of PCB levels, has shown concentrations up to 165 parts per million in trout.

"The present Lake Michigan water concentration of PCBs is generally below 10 parts per million and the range of PCB residue in smelt and lake trout is 2.5 parts per million to 165 parts per million respectively," Reed said.

Both officials said voluntary agreements reached with industry in the early 1970s have failed to cut the level of PCB residue in the environment — in birds and fish, for example — and said strong legislation is necessary.

The sole producer of PCBs is Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co., base in St. Louis. The company produces the chemical in its plant at Sauget, Ill., on the Mississippi River.

Earlier this week Monsanto said it will phase out production of PCBs after the industry makes arrangements for alternative materials. But the company said "it is too early to put an exact timetable on the phase-out."

Aggravating the government's problem is its concern about the health of the commercial fisheries industry. "If FDA lowers the current permissible level, virtually all species (of fish) would be unmarketable and the Great Lakes commercial fishery would be dead," Reed said.

But in response to a question about which priority should be greater, Reed said, "The two go together . . . The sooner we ban, the sooner we see a lowering of the level of PCBs, the faster we will see a rebirth of commercial sportfishing."

Reed told the committee there should be no repetition here of the Japanese PCB poisoning situation of 1968. In that instance, more than 1,000 Japanese suffered PCB poisoning after eating rice oil that was contamined by a PCB.

As a result, Japan has banned PCBs.