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Makers withdraw a poison

BY GUY

By our Science
Correspondent

Monsanto Chemicals Ltd., is to curtail strictly sales on the British market of the highly poisonous and persistent industrial chemicals known as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

Without any public announcement, the restrictions came voluntarily into operation in March and, after the last "unrestricted" orders are dispatched during the next two or three weeks, production of PCBs at the company's Newport factory will be sharply reduced. Monsanto are the sole producers in Britain and the US. A similar restriction was imposed on the US market some months ago.

PCBs, as persistent in the environment as organochlorine pesticides and almost as poisonous, have been in use since the 1930s and are now a widespread and significant component of the chemical contamination of the oceans. During the past few years, they have been increasingly implicated as a contributory cause in environmental disasters such as the destruction of birds in the Irish Sea in 1968.

Although strong in terms of circumstantial evidence, the environmental case against PCBs is by no means watertight. This action by Monsanto is, therefore, both commendable and unusual.

The question now is whether other countries will follow the Monsanto lead (both France and Germany manufacture PCBs in quantity) or whether opportunists with less environmental conscience will try to break into the market through the back door. This is something which the Department of the Environment could usefully watch.