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Limits Sought On Spreading Use of Toxin

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency asked Congress Wednesday for legislation to control toxic chemicals.

Currently, the federal government has only spotty authority to cope with such hazardous substances as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), said Russell Train, EPA administrator.

Train and Nathaniel Reed, assistant Interior Secretary for Fish and Wildlife, told a House environment subcommittee PCBs pose a significant threat to health.

But the chemical substance is only part of a big, dismaying picture, said Train. Potentially dangerous chemical compounds enter the market place at a rate of 1,000 a year, he said.

Legislation should be enacted to give the government the power to monitor and test all chemicals being proposed for industrial and consumer use, Train said.

Reed said exceedingly high levels of PCBs have been found in all major U.S. river and coastal systems and in much of the nation's soil. He said the compound harms the growth and reproduction of some species of fish and wildlife.

"PCBs are literally everywhere," said Reed.

PCBs have been produced since the 1920s and are key ingredients in plastics, hydraulic fluids, inks and electrical equipment.

Train said little can be done about the estimated 700 million tons of PCBs that have been discharged over the years into the environment.

But Train said EPA wants to prevent the escape into the environment of nearly comparable amount of PCBs estimated to be in products still in use.

William Papageorge, representing Monsanto Industrial Chemicals, the nation's only producer of PCB, said the company has voluntarily reduced its production by half and will stop altogether when suitable substitutes are developed.

"Monsanto has no desire to remain in the PCB manufacturing business any longer than necessary," he said.

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