GAINESVILLE, FLA.
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Lethal Pollution

It took years for scientists to discover that the pesticide DDT has permeated the world's water, air and land and was raising havoc with wildlife populations. In the meantime, such predator birds as the peregrine falcon and bald eagle were faced with extinction; DDT-contaminated fish and milk have been declared unfit for humans; songbird populations dwindled in some areas.

Only in the last year or so did biologists pinpoint how DDT prevents bird reproduction by attacking the female's sex hormones. As research continues, governments at all levels are groping for ways to control growing concentration of the pesticide. Foes of DDT advocate strictly selective use or an outright ban.

Even as the DDT controversy is thrashed out, scientists have detected new, more toxic chemicals building up in the environment. Relatives of DDT, though not pesticides, the new chemicals are polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). They are used in making paints, plastics, electrical insulators, tires, waxes, sealants and epoxy resins.

PCBs are produced under the trade name Aroclors by Monsanto Chemical Co., St. Louis. They were first identified in European birds by Swedish scientists. They apparently are released into the atmosphere and waterways by vaporizing, from factory smokestacks, by discharge into rivers and oceans and, possibly, even by the wearing of tires on freeways.

A team of University of California and Cornell University scientists has determined the PCBs are five times more powerful than DDT in hormone-destroying activity. Like DDT, they are found throughout the environment and their quantities are increasing rapidly. They have been found in the milk of nursing mothers in Colorado and in marine life off California, as well as in European birds.

What effects PCBs will have on man is not known, although in vapor form these chemicals are highly toxic. It is known that, again like DDT, they do not break down into harmless chemicals in a short period of time. Once in the environment, they won't go away.

The federal government has not set tolerance limits for PCBs in human food supplies at this stage, and Monsanto company spokesmen only say that their scientists and sales executives are studying the problem.

Dare we hope that study by government and industry will not drag out over years and years while the concentration of these lethal chemicals continues to build?

Is it too much to ask that new synthetic chemicals, devised to increase agricultural and industrial production efficiency, be thoroughly tested for possible deleterious effects on us and our environment before they are placed in use?

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