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Monsanto, U.S. Accused of Lagging on PCB

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Too little action to halt the environmental threat of "PCB" chemicals has been taken by Monsanto Corp. and the U.S. government, a congressman charged Tuesday.

Rep. William F. Ryan (Dem.), New York, made the accusations despite several Monsanto steps to control PCBs, and despite new government studies on the chemicals.

Ryan, a member of the House Interior Committee, first publicized the alleged hazards of PCB about two months ago. He compared it to DDT in seriousness.

He said PCBs are widespread in the nation's environment, and called for strict government controls and action by Monsanto to halt the alleged threat to birds, fish and possibly man.

PCBs, OR polychlorinated biphenyls, are manufactured in the United States exclusively by Monsanto at two locations. One is a few miles from downtown St. Louis, at Sauget, Ill.

The chemicals are in a Monsanto product called Aroclor, which is used in a variety of other products, ranging from paints and paper coatings, to electrical transformer fluids.

Scientists have found PCBs in birds, fish, evergreen needles and even human fat. They allegedly hamper reproduction in birds and are a low-level poison.

Ryan's critciisms of Monsanto and federal authorities came in response to a Globe-Democrat inquiry, to find out what action had followed the congressman's April 10 press conference on PCBs.

At that time, Ryan called on four federal agencies to investigate PCBs, and asked Monsanto to cooperate fully with all scientists and governmental agencies.

Monsanto responded to Ryan, the Globe-Democrat learned, by listing a number of steps it had taken to control PCBs.

These included "strictly monitoring the manufacture, use and disposal of PCB-containing products which could possibly build up in the ecological system."

ALSO, MONSANTO said it had met with scientists on PCBs; talked with government officials; suggested discontinuing pesticides containing PCBs; alerted customers to possible hazards and assisted them in switching to other Monsanto products.

Further, Monsanto told The Globe-Democrat, that all Aroclor sent to customers is now labeled as follows:

"This product contains polychlorinated biphenyls, which some studies have shown may be an environmental contaminant. Extreme care should be taken to prevent any entry into the environment through spills, leakage, use disposal, vaporization or otherwise."

Monsanto did not, however, take four steps specifically requested by Ryan.

They were: reveal the amounts of PCB released during manufacture; provide a complete list of products containing PCBs; label all products containing PCBs; and release to scientists sales and production figures of PCBs since 1940, so they can determine how much is in the environment.



REP. WILLIAM RYAN

Concerning yearly production figures, Monsanto noted that they were private information, but would be released to government agencies "when we receive assurance that these figures will be kept confidential."

Dissatisfied with Monsanto's response, Ryan told The Globe-Democrat that the corporation "continues to flaunt the public interest by withholding vital scientific data.

"IN AN APRIL 9 letter, I specifically asked Monsanto to detail the efforts it has made to keep PCBs from escaping into the environment during manufacture. Monsanto chose to answer with vagaries," Ryan said.

"I asked Monsanto to release production statistics to researchers in the field. All the company has offered is a confidential glimpse at statistics for public officials.

"I also asked Monsanto to require special labeling for all PCB materials. The company's letter to me failed to even acknowledge this request," Ryan said.

Concerning governmental controls of PCB, Ryan said "little or no action has been taken. Almost two months after I asked the Nixon Administration to mobilize its resources against PCB . . . I received promises, promises and more promises."

Among investigations currently under way, Ryan said, is a study by the Food and Drug Administration to determine presence or absence of PCBs in various foods.

An FDA spokesman told Ryan that "further action on labeling for food tolerances must await completions of . . . investigations."

The study on PCBs by the Fish and Wildlife Service showed that 50 per cent of juvenile fish died when exposed to a highly chlorinated PCB at 5 parts per billion in flowing sea water.

In a meeting on PCBs with The Globe-Democrat, Monsanto officials said that Aroclors which persist in the environment will be discontinued by the end of this year "where their use cannot be strictly controlled."

The officials speculated that PCBs get in the environment primarily through water pollution, rather than air pollution or through use of the chemicals in pesticides.

Careless handling of PCBs — such as dumping them down sewers — has been largely responsible for their escape in the past, said a spokesman, noting that this is no longer done.

An official noted that a "vast majority" of PCBs are in fluid form, with the primary use being as an insulating fluid in electrical transformers.

But spokesmen refused to list, on a product by product bases, exactly where the chemicals are found.

ONE COMPANY spokesman remarked that customers of Monsanto might be angered if they were identified as possible source of PCB in the environment.

PCBs have been manufactured by Monsanto for about 40 years. They also are made in Japan and Europe by other companies.

A Monsanto official refused to quote figures on the amount of PCBs escaping during manufacture at Sauget, but said the amount was "extremely small."

Heavy exposure of human beings to PCBs can cause liver and kidney diseases, and even death, according to Environment magazine.

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