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Study finds PCBs in all waterways

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WASHINGTON — Significant levels of polyclorinated biphenyls (PCBs) have turned up in virtually every major waterway across the country, according to a recent study conducted by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW).

PCBs are a highly toxic chemical that even in small amounts have been found to cause cancer in test animals. They are thought to have similar effects on humans.

HEW studies have revealed that the level of PCB contamination is far greater than was originally thought — at least 12 parts per million, twice the level considered safe by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Significant levels of PCB's also have been found in fish samples taken from the Connecticut and Merrimac rivers, the Penobscot River in Maine, the Hudson River and Lake Champlain to name a few.

There also are indications that FDA guidelines may be cut by more than half in the near future, to 5 parts per million, a move that would cause the immediate closing of major, multibillion dollar fisheries in the Great Lakes and Hudson River regions.

The irony is that the federal government knew of the cancer risk of PCBs, which have been used as a fire retardant chemical in the manufacture of electrical equipment, since 1966.

What the government did not know, and is still trying to find out, is the extent of PCB contamination. It is estimated that 10 million pounds of the lethal chemical are seeping in the environment each year.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimated recently that direct discharges of PCBs into waterways account for only one-half of 1 per cent of all PCB contamination.

The other 99.5 per cent are entering the environment through landfills and dumps which contain PCB discarded products, according to EPA estimates.

Such products include refrigerators, air conditioners, home heating units, virtually all major electrical products. No section of the country is immune to the PCB problem.

In 1970 and 1971, federal officials thought the PCBs could be restricted by working voluntarily with industry to limit their use to enclosed systems.

The sole U.S. manufacturer, Monsanto Co., agreed at that time to phase out the use of chemical as soon as it became economically feasible.

But it has become apparent in recent studies that even when use is restricted to sealed equipment, the toxic chemical still finds its way into the environment.

EPA Administrator Russell Train testified before a House committee in January that the small amount of PCBs being discharged directly into waterways did not warrant administrative or legal action by the EPA.

Train said the agency has no authority to deal "effectively" with the PCB problem and recommended that Congress enact a toxic substances control bill, which it did only two weeks ago after three years of wrangling.

Ironically, the law itself would have given the EPA authority to screen toxic chemicals before they are marketed. It was only through an amendment, sponsored by Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., that PCBs will be phased out of use complete-

ly over the next two and one-half years.

In the meantime, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has for the past four years challenged the "bureaucratic lethargy" of the EPA in not using existing authority to ban direct discharges into waterways.

The Water Pollution Control Act of 1974, according to the NRDC, requires the EPA to issue regulations restricting discharges of toxic substances into waterways.

The act called on the EPA within six months of enactment to draw up a list of chemicals and pesticides considered hazardous to human health.

Four years and a series of lawsuits later, the EPA only now has begun to draw up regulations restricting PCB use under the 1972 law.

But even these, NRDC charges, are inadequate because they do not ban discharges into municipal waste water treatment facilities, which the group says make up about 80 per cent of all water-related contamination.

The proposed standards also would allow exemptions in cases where companies plead "economic hardship."

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