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PCBs OF CONCERN IN HOUSE AND SENATE HEARINGS

Hearings concerning the effects of pollutants and toxic substances were recently concluded, respectively, by the Subcommittee on Environment and the Atmosphere of the House Committee on Science and Technology, and the Subcommittee on the Environment of the Senate Commerce Committee.

The House Subcommittee held seven days of hearings on the "Costs and Chronic Effects of Low-Level Pollutants." Among the pollutants of particular concern were polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), which are reputedly causing reproductive failures in a variety of fish and some mammals, thinning of bird's egg shells, and birth defects in a wide spectrum of wildlife. The House hearings produced agreement that there is increasing awareness in the scientific community that chronic exposure to low-level pollutants is probably responsible for a large portion of the increase in human cancer; may very likely cause genetic mutations, birth defects and other insults to man, animals and plants; and may produce weather and climatic changes. Consensus among witnesses was that the costs to society of these impacts are staggering; but that far too little is known about the chemical, biochemical, genetic, synergistic and climatic interrelations of these substances and the constituents of ecosystems.

The Senate Subcommittee, like that of the House, was concerned with PCBs. Dr. *John L. Buckley*, consultant to EPA's Office of Research & Development, voiced EPA's heightened concern over recent investigations which suggest that "environmental contamination including some drinking water supplies by PCBs is more widespread, and that some concentrations are higher than previously believed." PCBs are in many ways analogous to DDT in that they are slow to degrade in the environment, they accumulate

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and build up in the food chain, they are stored in fat tissue and, in laboratory tests, they have produced cancer. Dr. Buckley noted that the only control over introducing PCBs into the environment was an agreement with the only U.S. domestic producer, Monsento Corp., to stop selling PCBs except for use in closed electrical systems. This agreement, however, does not have the force of the law, he said, and does not effectively govern customer usage of either domestic or foreign-produced PCBs. He noted that EPA is sponsoring a National Conference on PCBs late this month in Chicago.

Another EPA spokesman, *Glenn Schweitzer*, director of the Office of Toxic Substances, noted that sportsfishermen are already being warned by N.Y. State and the States around Lake Michigan not to eat more than one meal per week of fish caught in the Hudson River or Lake Michigan due to the high PCB concentrations. He also noted that PCBs found in drinking water cannot be regulated by the Federal Food & Drug laws because they are not considered "food additives."

Meanwhile, the General Electric Corp. has reportedly admitted that over a period of 15 years, 65 of its workers in two upstate New York plants became ill, probably because of exposure to the toxic chemical PCB. The case involving GE arose from hearings held by the State Dept. of Environmental Conservation, which in September ordered the company to stop discharging the chemical into the Hudson River by next September, because State researchers said they found PCBs in high levels in fish taken from that river below the GE plants. GE uses the chemical in making electronic parts.

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