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Proper Shopper

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International concern about possible health and environmental effects of the industrial pollutant polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) was voiced at a recent conference sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. About 500 scientists, businessmen, and public servants from the U.S, Canada, Japan and throughout Europe met in Chicago in November to discuss recent research and approaches to control of the PCB problem.

According to Michael Duttweiler of the New York Sea Grant Advisory Service, topics covered in the conference included PCB caused health effects, uses and sources of PCB's, environmental effects, industrial substitutes for PCBs, and possible controls for PCB pollution. Duttweiler said that: "Freshwater sportsmen and others frequently eating fish from PCB contaminated waters were identified as groups who should be aware of possible health effects. While the effects are still uncertain, persons eating large amounts of freshwater fish that might be contaminated should consider limiting their consumption."

Much discussion during the first day of the conference centered on health hazzards of PCB consumption. Various symptoms such as skin lesions, liver problems, and reduced reproductive rates have been produced by feeding PCBs to mice, chickens, dogs and monkeys.

Duttweiler noted that: "One of the most significant findings reported at the conference was that rhesus monkeys fed PCBs at levels known to have produced health problems in humans exhibited the same symptoms as did the humans. This means that rhesus monkeys are in fact a good 'model' for testing the effects of PCBs on humans. Research can now continue using smaller and smaller doses to evaluate possible effects of occasional consumption of PCB contaminated foods by humans. As this process continues, specific health standards can be defined."

Scientists involved in the conference were quick to admit that we still have much to learn about PCBs. There are over 100 forms of PCB in use today, each of which may exhibit different physical and chemical properties and toxicities. This is further complicated by lack of definite knowledge about what happens to PCB once they are metabolized in the body.

The vast majority of PCBs used currently in the U.S. go into production of electrical capacitors and transformers. The low flammability of PCBs makes them especially suited for these uses. Prior to 1972, PCBs were much more widely used. Papers, plastic resins, hydraulic fluids and many other products produced before 1972 and now either still in use or in landfills represent a significant reservoir of PCBs. There also are susbstantial stores of PCBs in the sediments of many lakes and streams.

Even if current uses were completely controlled or banned, the PCB problem would be a persistant one. Duttweiler reported that several researchers found significant PCB contents in precipitation and atmospheric fallout that reach our waters. It might turn out that air pollution is a key to the PCB problem rather than direct water pollution. Several researchers and public servants at the conference recommended complete bans on production and use of PCBs until their effects are better known.

New York Sea Grant is following the PCB problem closely because of its contacts with large numbers of people who may be eating PCB contaminated fish on a regular basis, particularly fish from Lake Ontario.

Further information on the PCB conference or on PCBs in general can be obtained through the Sea Grant Advisory Service Office, State University College, Oswego.

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