U.S. official urges action to greatly reduce use of PCB

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Sharp warnings about the dangers to health from a group of potentially toxic chemicals known as PCBs were made in Chicago last week by government officials and researchers including a chemist who estimated that at least 10 million pounds of PCBs yearly are "lost into the environment."

A top federal official urged "drastic action" to reduce greatly the use of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), and two researchers said PCB residues have been found in human tissue and in milk "collected from the general population" of the United States.

And, while scientists said the northeastern United States and Ontario appear to be "hot spots" for concentrations of PCBs, they pointed out that no geographic area can be considered safe from the potentially harmful chemicals.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and several other federal agencies were the hosts of the three-day conference. Russell Train, EPA administrator, said the conference was intended to help government and industry determine steps to reduce PCB contamination of the environment.

PCBs are similar in many respects to DDT, which they have largely replaced in the alphabet of environmental contaminants. PCBs are used in a wide array of manufactured products and processes, and industries have made wide use of them since 1930, when they were first produced by a company that later became part of the Monsanto Chemical Corp.

Monsanto is the sole U.S. producer of PCBs, used in the manufacture of electrical transformers and capacitors. They are useful in closed electrical systems because they conduct heat but not electricity. The only substitutes for them are highly flammable.

In the late 1960s, PCBs were found in significant amounts in the tissues of various species of birds, including some in the Arctic and on remote Pacific islands. PCBs were then shown to have a striking resemblance to DDT in their effects. For example, both chemicals reduce birds' capacity to reproduce and cause the egg shells that are formed to be so thin as to break easily.

Research papers presented by scientists during the Chicago conference painted a more disturbing picture, that of widespread PCB contamination of human tissue and human milk. Dr. Frederick Kutz of the EPA's national human-monitoring program said that perhaps 41 to 46 percent of all Americans have the chemicals in their tissues.

Kutz and S. C. Strassman, also of the monitoring program, said their finding was based on a national survey of human fatty tissue in 1970 and 1974. Several hundred Americans have been tested. The researchers also said the chlorinated hydrocarbon chemicals were found in human milk samples collected in Arkansas and Mississippi.

A Canadian medical expert said that of 173 people checked in Ontario, 39 percent had levels of PCBs of more than one part per million in their tissues. PCB levels in fatty tissue were higher in males than in females, he said.

People who have worked with PCBs have complained of various ailments, including nausea, dizziness and eye and nasal irritation. In experiments with laboratory animals, PCBs have caused liver cancer and reproductive failures.

The federal Food and Drug Administration bans the commercial sale of any fish with a PCB content of 5 parts per million, and Canada set a limit last week of 2 parts per million on fish sold in that nation.

Thomas E. Kopp, of the EPA's Office of Toxic Substances in Washington, said at least 10 million pounds of PCBs escape into the environment each year "through evaporation, leaks and spills." Kopp, a chemist, said that at least 10 plants in the United States are dumping the chemicals directly into waterways and that two others are pouring them into municipal sewage systems.

PCBs are not removed by any known sewage-treatment process, and are then presumed to remain in the treated sewage. They are not readily biodegradable in the environment.

(None of the 12 plants cited by Kopp is in the Upper Midwest. A federal-state task force studying PCB contamination of the upper Mississippi River in Minnesota and Wisconsin reported this month that 56 municipal and industrial waste-discharge outlets along the river "cannot be considered to be significant sources" of the chemicals.

(But that report cautioned that investigators made a limited study last summer, and that PCB contamination of some river fish may be caused by a large number of diffuse discharges rather that a single major source or sources.)

Nathaniel P. Reed, assistant U.S. secretary of the Interior, said PCBs "are literally everywhere," and he called for "immediate drastic action" to prevent contamination of the Great Lakes' commercial fishery.

"Nothing short" of such action, said Reed, "will enable us to raise anything better than lakes full of (inedible) fish. With the present preponderance of PCBs, the life span of the Great Lakes fishery will be limited to a single generation."

Reed and other officials said that high levels of PCBs have been found not only in some fish taken from the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi, but also from the Hudson River in New York State, the Gulf of Mexico and southern California waters.

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