PCB Problem Campaign Topic For Some Indiana Candidates

By Pat O'Brien

The polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) problem probably couldn't be considered much of an election year issue if at least some of the candidates for public office didn't try to turn it into a campaign topic also.

Democratic candidate for governor Larry Conrad said recently that "there are dairy farmers in this state who are being driven to bankruptcy and the Bowen administration is doing nothing about it."

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But Bowen has taken a clear stand on the subject, with a multi-faceted program to identify PCB sources when and where they are being introduced into the food chain and to eliminate them.

"More is unknown about these potentially toxic substances than is known. PCBs present a potential health hazard, a potential environmental hazard; a potential economic hazard and a threat to elements of our food supply system," Bowen told listeners at a recent national governors conference held in Indianapolis.

"Clearly this is a national problem, one that can be solved only with a concerted and cooperative national effort," Bowen said.

There are many who advocate that the only answer to the PCB situation is to totally ban their usage in all products and to enact legislation to end their manufacture in the first place.

The other side of that coin is the industrial groups who say that there's never been any real proof that PCBs are harmful in the small amounts usually found in foodstuffs and that impairing or shutting down plants which are turning the chemical loose in the environment is not in anyone's best interests.

The reason some say that there isn't any hard-core evidence that PCBs cause any great biological damage is that PCBs haven't been in the public's eye long enough for that evidence to be unearthed.

Several persons who are working on research with PCBs said it is not possible to allow persons to eat PCBs for experimental purposes, so they must proceed another way — through the use of animals.

There also is the example of the Yusho, Japan, incident several years ago in which several persons died and many others developed a variety of effects after eating PCB-laced rice oil.

Rich Peoples, a city chemist in Bloomington, said recently that m[ost] of the information about the e[ffects] of the chemical on humans [comes] from the accidental leaking of PCB's into the food supply. But even that leaves a poorly followable track to trace what may or may not be the effects of ingesting the clear, colorless oil that is PCB.

Some of the more serious effects of poisoning by the chemical have been found in research using rats and Rhesus monkeys. The animals were found to have liver malfunctions, loss of hair and nausea after being given the chemical.

Other researchers have said that PCBs inhibit or alter reproductory functions, sometimes producing sterility in subject animals. Births of still-born monkeys have also occurred after subjecting them to PCBs.

Among test animals, skin disorders are commonplace and tumors, both benign and malignant, occur regularly.

As might be expected, there is quite a bit concern of late about who is to pay the bills for PCB pollution, and at first sight, it may be a considerable job to bear.

Monsanto Corp., the only company which manufactures the chemical, has been quietly making settlements with persons who have used the chemical and have had to make expensive changes after finding out about government restrictions on products with high PCB contents.

One person who received such a settlement, and wished to remain unidentified, said he was forced to sign an agreement with Monsanto stipulating that he would never reveal the amount of the settlement or for what it was made when he got an out-of-court agreement with the firm.

The city of Bloomington also is embroiled in a legal battle with Westinghouse Corp., which has been regularly dumping PCBs there.

The city wants Westinghouse to pay for cleaning the mess up, but no agreement has as yet been reached.

Mayor Frank McCloskey said: "We are not an economic salvage system for Westinghouse."

While that transpired several years ago, the "secret" of PCB involvement in a multitude of environmental situations has been made clear by the pervasiveness of the chemical.

The Environmental Protection Agency has estimated there are between 300 and 400 million pounds of PCBs in the environment at this time and that only a small amount of them have been accounted for. The question is: what is it going to do as it mixes more thoroughly in the water and atmosphere, driving the quantities of it higher than they already are? And that's a question no one seems to have the answer to.

Dr. James Pyle, a chemist at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, who has been doing studies of PCBs for some time, points out, "We don't know enough to spell out what the dangers are. Be we know these chemicals are incompatible with a healthy environment."

And as a Food and Drug Administration official put it, "even if they (PCBs) aren't harmful at all, there's still no excuse for an industrial chemical to be in the food chain."

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