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Editorials

PCB And Policy

The Environmental Protection Agency's sudden policy reversal on phosphate-based detergents didn't make sense to a lot of people. We must certainly hope the federal anti-pollution work will be continuing any such ban in the matter of paper-board recycling.

The fact is, decades of phosphate in laundry detergents have contributed heavily to the loading of the country's surface waters with organic materials. Eliminating or greatly reducing the phosphorus content of liquid wastes is an obvious way to battle pollution and extrapolation of precious water resources.

So governmental units everywhere began to ban or limit the use of phosphorus in cleaning products. But the U.S. Surgeon General a couple of weeks ago made the surprising statement that substitute ingredients developed to replace phosphates "virtually constitute a health hazard" if swallowed, inhaled or introduced into the eye.

Whereupon, to the surprise of many of us, the Environmental Protection Agency withdrew. EPA had been urging people to stop using detergent phosphates and suddenly EPA announced that we all continue to use them. Now EPA says it favors having the federal government spend an extra half-billion dollars to help communities build treatment facilities to remove the phosphorus from waste waters.

Agencies of government, of course, have no money except what they receive from taxpayers. So what EPA is saying here — instead of telling people to use soap and a little elbow grease — or encouraging detergent manufacturers to develop products that can make up for the lack of it — is that we should go on putting phosphate-laden waste water into the nation's rivers and then spend extra billions for treatment operations to try to get it back out.

Fortunately, a great many communities are not watching but are going ahead with their phosphate-based bath.

Dr. Jesse Steinfeld, to be sure, has a responsibility as surgeon general to guard the public health. Just as William F. Buckleyham as EPA administrator has a duty to work for a healthful environment. Their efforts are and should be complementary.

It seems to us that in the light of the Public Health Service discovery, the surgeon general might have called for general warnings on labels of any offending detergents made for internal use or for washing one's face.

And the EPA boys might well have reacted by urging faster action to find safe, phosphate-free products.

As it turned out, instead of keeping pressure on the chemical companies to produce suitable substitutes, the federal government has tried to give phosphate detergents a reprieve. Says New York City's unhappy environmental protection administrator, "The best news a polluter can get from government is an invitation to do nothing, and that's the word the detergent industry got."

We bring all this up again because now the Food and Drug Administration has just reported that a persistent poison called PCB has been getting into the nation's market baskets in potentially unsafe amounts because some food processors were using recycled paperboard products containing it.

In this instance, FDA officials have proceeded sensibly to find the source of the PCB — presumably several labs and recycling plant castings. It appears. And the only manufacturer of the dangerous chemical has announced that it will no longer be sold for use except in closed systems in that product that got to consumers will not contain it.

Perhaps we will be able to avoid any major health hazard with PCB, which is fortunate. However, the way things have been going, we'd probably have one agency telling us to call off paper recycling activities and another one suggesting we develop expensive methods around doctors to treat PCB victims.

FOR NEWS, CALL
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Phosphates okay recycled paper NAY

By WILLIAM B. MEO
WASHINGTON (UPI) — For the second time this month, an industry move designed to improve the environment and please the government has unexpectedly proved a possible noose to public health.

On Sept. 18, U.S. Surgeon General Jesse L. Steinfeld advised lawmakers to ban phosphate detergents after all, although acknowledging the phosphates contribute to lake deterioration.

The government has encouraged detergent makers for years to find substitutes for phosphates. But Steinfeld and one substance, NTA, might cause cancer and the second type was so caustic it could kill children who might eat it.

Monday, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said it found dangerously high levels of the industrial chemical PCBs in shredded wheat and macaroni.

The PCBs came from food packaging made of recycled paper.

The government has encouraged use of recycled paper to reduce waste and litter. The recycled gray re-inked made of recycled material is widely used in food packaging. But the FDA said the use may have to be restricted if some recycling facilities widespread

heard.

PCBs, short for polychlorinated biphenyls, have caused liver damage and birth defects in laboratory rodents. Although harm to human infants has not been proved, the FDA has banned an individual dry food with more than 5 parts per million PCBs.

An FDA spokesman said the food processors created hundreds of parts per million PCBs. Cornish was pulled up by the shredded wheat and macaroni to use the 5 parts per million safety level.

The agency said it was testing crackers, bread crumbs, macaroni, pretzels, potato chips, cereals, baking mixes, dried milk, instant meals, powdered gelatin, cookies, rice, chewing gum, and other products, grain cereals, dried fruits and frozen meats, all of which are listed in recycled paperboards.