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PCB tale tells it all

By Martha Angle and Robert Walters

WASHINGTON (NEA) - Bitter complaints about overzealous federal regulations have become a popular item within the business community. But too often ignored are the corporate excesses that require government control in the public interest.

One current case in point involves the Monsanto Co., a St. Louis-based firm that has embarked upon a multimillion-dollar propaganda campaign to counter "an irrational, anti-chemical mood (that) seems to be sweeping the country."

Monsanto has good reason to be concerned about that purported threat because it is one of the nation's largest producers of industrial chemicals. "Our industry, our company, our jobs are at stake," the company says in a slick brochure.

"The public is being fed a daily diet of bad chemical news. In newspapers and magazines. On radio and television," claims that booklet. "The message comes through loud and clear: 'Chemicals are dangerous.'"

While "not opposed to government regulation," Monsanto warns: "Running possibly harmful chemicals is only one way the government can cripple our industry. Over-regulation is just as serious a threat."

In an effort to influence public opinion, Monsanto has launched a "Chemical Facts of Life" program with a budget of $1.2 million last year and $4.5 million this year.

That money will pay for television commercials with "emotional impact," magazine ads aimed at "thought-leaders," a documentary movie, traveling exhibits and "a huge cadre of Monsanto employees giving speeches at every level."

But the publicity blitz has barely mentioned polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) — a highly toxic, extremely persistent family of industrial chemicals produced in this country for many years exclusively by Monsanto.

Back in 1970, the late Rep. William F. Ryan, D-N.Y., citing early scientific warnings about PCB dangers to humans, called for strict federal controls. The indignant company assured him that it was taking voluntary action "to insure that (PCBs) present the minimum possible threat."

By mid-1971, however, PCB leaks had produced one of the major chemical disasters of the past decade. Food products seized, confiscated, destroyed or banned by federal officials because of PCB contamination in 1970 and 1971 included:

More than 600,000 eggs in Virginia and North Carolina, 300,000 pounds of turkey roll in South Carolina, 50,000 turkeys in Minnesota, and 300,000 chickens in Maine, New York and North Carolina.

Even after the widespread damage became known, Monsanto claimed it was being victimized by "scare tactics, political charges and sensational headlines." Last autumn, however, the company finally halted all PCB production and distribution.

Many of the cases in the early 1970s resulted from a single major PCB spill, contaminating 32 million pounds of fish meal. But subsequent, less dramatic seepage into the food chain makes PCBs a continuing threat to public health.

An estimated 300,000 tons of PCBs have escaped into the environment during the past 40 years. One Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) scientist has warned of "gross contamination of the global ecosystem."

PCBs unfortunately are soluble in the fatty tissue of birds, fish, animals — and humans. Recent EPA surveys have found yearly increases of PCB residues in human adipose tissue.

"It was much more persistent that we originally thought," confesses one Monsanto official in St. Louis. "Maybe we should have tracked the problem a little harder and a little faster."

But the company's new propaganda program virtually ignores the continuing danger. Instead, Monsanto now is distributing copies of a speech in which its board chairman and president, John W. Hanley, complains of "strict regulatory interpretation" and "outbursts of emotionalism" in dealing with chemicals.

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