PCB Chemicals Seen Being Little Utilized

Limited Data Available Indicate Steps by Monsanto Are Paring Levels of Discharges in Water

By a Wall Street Journal Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency's new policy of restricting water discharges of chemicals known as polychlorinated biphenyls is likely to produce few, if any, immediate enforcement actions.

The EPA said it will act to keep PCB levels in rivers and lakes below 0.01 part a billion, following release of a government task force study that recommends tight limitations on the chemicals' uses.

However, one conclusion of the task force was that, while PCBs can have serious adverse effects on human health, "so far as is now known, these adverse effects won't occur as a result of the levels of PCB currently in the environment."

John Buckley, deputy research director for the EPA who helped write the report, offered the further opinion that the agency probably won't have to move against industrial users of PCBs to achieve the formal ceiling.

The limited information available suggests levels of the chemicals in water are dropping, thanks to the voluntary efforts by Monsanto Co., sole U.S. producer of PCBs, to limit their uses, Mr. Buckley said. He cited the example of one company, known to be discharging PCBs, that over the past year cut by 90% the amount going into the waterway receiving wastes from its plant.

PCBs have been employed in a wide range of products including plastics, paints, sealants, caulking compounds, cutting oils, and heat transfer and hydraulic fluids. Monsanto, among other actions, has discontinued sales of the chemicals for open uses that might permit them to reach waterways. However, use of PCBs as insulating fluid in transformers and electrical capacitors is being allowed to continue because they are contained and because nonflammable substitutes aren't available.

Monsanto's actions were backed by the report which found that use of substitutes in transformers and capacitors would greatly increase the chance of fire and explosion.

PCBs concern government health officials because, like DDT and other persistent pesticides, they are able to build up in the fatty tissue of animals. In fact, EPA researchers believe that fish accumulate PCBs at about three times the rate for DDT, thus creating the danger of PCB levels in fish consumed by humans exceeding the ceiling of five parts per million established by the Food and Drug Administration.

Earlier this year, the FDA issued tougher regulations covering PCBs in food, including steps to prevent the chemicals in food packaging and to prevent PCB contamination in food plants.

The task force report said that broad federal authority is needed to restrict use, distribution and imports of PCBs and to collect information about it from industry. The chemicals are widely manufactured in Japan, Italy, France, West Germany and Russia, and possibly in Brazil, Argentina, India and East Germany. "Many electrical products imported from those countries may use PCBs," the report said.

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Passage of the Nixon administration's Toxic Substances Control Act, now before Congress, or similar legislation, is needed to plug this regulatory gap, the task force concluded.

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