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Sole producer of PCB will phase out chemical

ST. LOUIS (UPI) — Monsanto Co. Monday sought to head off environmentalists' efforts to ban a group of toxic chemicals known as PCBs by announcing it will phase out production of them.

Monsanto is the sole maker of PCB, or polychlorinated biphenyl, which is used primarily as a nonconductor direct electrical current. The chemical has been a necessary ingredient in most power-generating equipment.

Environmental groups had petitioned the federal government to lower the permissible levels of PCBs in food on grounds the chemicals are a cancer hazard.

Federal officials have said PCBs had been responsible for liver cancer and reproductive failures in laboratory animals, and some workers using the chemicals have complained of allergic reactions.

F. J. Fitzgerald, a Monsanto vice president, said no timetable has been set for the phase out, but "it would be in a planned and orderly manner."

"As soon as we are satisfied, that the electrical power supply industry's needs for usable, acceptable alternate dielectric fluids have been met, by whomever, Monsanto will voluntarily shut down its PCB manufacturing unit," he said.

PCBs have been used in manufacturing processes since 1930, but their presence as toxic substances in the environment was not detected until 1966 because they wre confused with DDT, with which they have a similar chemical structure.

At a three-day conference on PCBs last November in Chicago, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nathaniel P. Reed recommended the federal government impose a nearly total ban on the chemicals. Reed said he was "deeply shocked by the pervasiveness of PCBs; they are literally everywhere."

He said exceedingly high levels of PCBs were found in fish from all parts of the country, indicating the nation's rivers and lakes were "in mortal danger."

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