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Toxic substances control

The Roman Empire declined and finally fell, according to authoritative speculation, not because of the barbarian hordes, overextended colonization or moral decadence, but mainly as a result of lead poisoning.

Eating and drinking from vessels containing lead and dabbing themselves with lead-laden cosmetics, the upper-class Romans unwittingly poisoned themselves, sapping their vitality and the vitality of the society they headed. (The poor people used cheap earthenware utensils and didn't fool with cosmetics.)

A study of ancient tombstone inscriptions indicates a life expectancy of 22 to 25 years among upper-class Romans. Their birthrate was one-fourth that needed to replace themselves.

What about us? Could the dwelling and fall of our civilization be brought about by our unquestioning acceptance of the marvels of modern chemistry?

Each day's news seems to bring another account of the health effects of some chemical contaminant: Kepone, arsenic, PCBs, vinyl chloride, asbestos, mercury, lead, etc., etc.

While new chemical compounds developed and released into our environment in recent years have benefited us greatly, only a small proportion of these substances were adequately tested for potentially harmful effects. The primary testing has been on us — the American public. Long after a chemical substance has been marketed and widely dispersed into the environment, we have discovered that it can cause cancer, attack the liver, lungs, kidneys, central nervous system, result in infant mortality or genetic damage.

But on Sept. 30 — after almost six years of patching and only days before it adjourned — Congress finally reached agreement on the provisions of the Toxic Substances Control Act — a measure that will give us a chance to control the use of untested chemicals. President Ford has just signed the bill. Under the legislation:

(1) Manufacturers and processors must test chemicals, both those in use and those coming onto the market.

(2) Manufacturers must give 90 days notice to the Environmental Protection Agency before they begin commercial production of new substances, or the processing of existing substances for certain uses. This notification provision is the "heart" of the act, says Sen. Warren Magnuson (D.-Wash.). It "will no longer allow the public or the environment to be used as a testing ground for the safety of these products."

(3) Production of PCB must be ended within two years and its use must be severely restricted in the meantime. PCBs are used in insulators and fire retardants; in electrical transformers, are released into and carried by air and water, are long-lived and toxic. Even low exposure can cause metabolic disturbances, embryo abnormalities, and miscarriages. PCBs have contaminated our waterways throughout the U.S., particularly in the Great Lakes area and the Northeast. The latest bad news is that the Susquehanna River, longest in the eastern U.S., flowing through New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland on the way to the Chesapeake Bay, may be contaminated.

Congress singled out the PCB hazard and gave it special priority — and industry apparently agrees. Monsanto Chemical already has announced it will cease production of PCBs at the end of October 1977 and end all sales when inventories are depleted.

In its final form, the law has wide-ranging support — and now the Manufacturing Chemists Assn. and some other elements of the chemical industry indicate they can accept the final version.

But a law at its beginning is just a piece of paper. Its ultimate success or failure rests on how it is carried out — and right now, that means EPA's administrator, Russell Train.

Train says he is appointing an advisory committee to include representatives of industry, health experts, environmentalists, other public interest groups — and that he will consult closely with this group in developing policy, will insist on an effective administration with a minimum of red tape.

But he has less than sufficient funds and manpower to handle this large, complex job. Essential will be the cooperation of the chemical manufacturers in complying with the testing, notification and reporting provisions of the law. Will they help insure their products are safe for us and future generations? Or will they throw up roadblocks in the interest of short-term profits?

We will all be watching. Our lives and civilization as we know it may well depend on the outcome.

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