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In Washington

Persistent, prevalent PCBs

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WASHINGTON — With apologies to composer Woody Guthrie, here's a new line for one of the country's best known folk songs: "From the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters, this land is soaked with PCB."

PCBs are polychlorinated biphenyls, a family of toxic, persistent industrial chemicals that have caused liver damage and birth defects in laboratory animals.

The redwood forests dot the southern coast of Oregon, where a commercial bakery recently discovered it had purchased, and must destroy, 50,000 PCB-contaminated eggs.

The Gulf Stream waters wash the west coast of Florida, where a chemist recently found a marked decline in the potential fertility of young men apparently related to PCB traces found in the subjects' sperm.

In Franklin, Idaho, a poultry company is destroying more than 300,000 contaminated chickens and more than 1 million contaminated eggs.

In Clinton, Iowa, a packing company is destroying the meat from 30,000 chickens purchased from the Idaho firm. In Richmond, Utah, PCB traces have been found in 75,000 frozen cakes that must be destroyed.

In Billings, Mont., federal health officials have converged on a hog processing firm whose meat meal byproduct is suspected of being the source of the most recent outbreak of PCB contamination.

The federal investigation already encompasses most of the Northwest because the Montana firm sells 100,000 to 200,000 pounds of animal feed weekly throughout Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, Minnesota and North and South Dakota.

The Florida experience, described at the mid-September annual meeting of the American Chemical Society, led researchers to conclude that 23 percent of a group of male college students involved in the study suffered from functional sterility.

Other scientists reported at the American Chemical Society convention that tons of PCBs fall from the air each year into the Great Lakes.

Food products confiscated, destroyed or banned because of PCB contamination in the early 1970s include more than 400,000 eggs in Virginia and North Carolina, 250,000 pounds of turkey roll in South Carolina, 50,000 turkeys in Minnesota and 250,000 chickens in Maine, New York and North Carolina.

New York's Hudson River, Alabama's streams and Lake Michigan were found to have such high levels of PCBs that fishing in those waters is banned. Milk contamination has been reported in West Virginia and Ohio.

Meanwhile, the Monsanto Co., sole U.S. producer and marketer of PCBs for almost half a century, is propagandizing the public about the real and imagined glories of industrial chemicals.

Monsanto finally halted its production of PCBs (Aroclor) in the fall of 1977, but not until it had produced enough of the toxic liquid to float a navy.

The firm in recent years has claimed that it always was concerned about the dangers posed by PCBs and "has made every effort" to keep the public informed about the hazards.

But when the threat of PCBs was first disclosed in the early 1970s, Monsanto denigrated those revelations as mere "political charges and sensational headlines. . .scare tactics and sensational reporting."

The company now has mounted an advertising campaign designed to demonstrate that chemicals are valuable, if not indispensable, to modern life.