56-66E TOXIC MATERIALS NEWS
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1800 EPA REPORTS 10-MILLION POUNDS OF PCBs ENTER ENVIRONMENT EACH YEAR

At least 10-million pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls are lost into the environment each year through vaporization, leaks and spills, Thomas E. Kopp, a chemist with Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Toxic Substances, estimated during the opening of EPA's conference on PCBs in Chicago Nov. 19-21.

Outlining the extent of the PCB problem, Kopp said that at least 10 plants are dumping PCBs directly into U.S. waterways and another two are discharging the chemicals into municipal sewage treatment systems. Since PCBs are not removed by any known sewage treatment process they are assumed to remain in sewage effluent.

EPA Administrator Russell E. Train took the opportunity of the conference to urge adoption of Federal toxic substances control legislation. Without authority of such legislation an estimated 600 chemicals are introduced into commercial use each year with no "systematic, advance assessment of their potential impact upon public health," he pointed out.

Pointing to the problem of PCBs, he said the current regulatory system for curbing use of chemicals is ineffective. Food and Drug Administration and EPA took action to lower PCB levels in food and water, and other countries have limited PCB use overseas, Train noted. Such actions were expected to "take care" of the PCB problem, but "instead, more than three years later, we find that, although PCB levels in food have steadily declined, PCBs are present in our environment to a far greater degree and at higher levels than we have previously thought ... The evidence we have accumulated over the past three years had underscored our original concern over the toxicity of PCBs and over the potential health hazard posed by the presence of high PCB concentrations in waterways, in water supplies and in fish."

Without toxics control legislation, he concluded, "We find ourselves without the authority we need to really cope with the problems posed by PCBs -- the authority to limit selected uses and distribution of PCBs as well as to require testing concerning the health and ecological effects of proposed substitutes."

There is a possibility of ordering individual plants to cease the discharge of PCBs under Section 504, the emergency powers provision of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, but Train expressed hesitancy at using that provision. "Conceivably it could give you authority to halt PCBs, but there is a question as to whether it would hold up in court," Train explained. "I am not entirely decided on whether we can use it -- it would be a very difficult route to go."

Immediate goal of regulators, Assistant Secretary of Interior for Fish, Wildlife and Parks Nathaniel Reed suggested, should be elimination of all sources of PCBs in the environment within three years. Toward this end, he supported a national ban on use of domestic and imported PCBs other than in transformers and capacitors. Latter uses should be reviewed in light of potential replacement products, he said, adding that prior to use of alternatives, intensive evaluation of hazards associated with substitute chemicals must be undertaken.

For the long term, Reed pointed out, legislation that will preclude new "PCBs" from being discharged into the environment must be pursued. "The passage of an effective toxic substances act and the complete control of PCB importation are imperative to the health of the American people." A substance by substance approach to control of toxics only delays and hampers efforts to regulate the occurrence of poisons in the environment, he concluded.

While the government officials noted the need for control over the use of chemicals in general, in Washington, Environmental Defense Fund and Natural Resources Defense Council sought immediate action on PCBs. They filed petition with FDA seeking an immediate lowering of permissible levels of PCBs in human food and an eventual ban on foods containing those chemicals. FDA should lower the current permitted level of 5 parts per million of PCBs in fish, petition contended.

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Explaining EDF and NRDC petition, Dr. Joseph Highland, Director of EDF's toxic chemical program, stated that "quick and continuing action by the FDA to lower levels of PCBs permitted in foods will not only reduce the risk to consumers from involuntary exposure to a potential human carcinogen, but will also educate the public and government regulatory agencies regarding the need to eliminate entirely continuing environmental contamination with PCBs from whatever sources."

At the Chicago conference, NRDC's A. Karim Ahmed said the environmental group also supports a phaseout of all uses of PCBs, as well as a ban on import and export of the chemicals; development of a PCB use and consumption inventory to pinpoint all discharges of the substances into the environment; an accelerated program of monitoring and surveillance of PCBs in fish, wildlife and foods by state and Federal agencies; moratorium on all dredging of river bottoms until a study is conducted to examine resultant resuspension of PCBs in river water; and promulgation by EPA of toxic standards for PCBs such that water in receiving streams has a maximum 0.001 parts per billion level, as well as swift passage of legislation authorizing control of all toxic substances.

Reporting on reduction of PCB levels in foods as a result of ban on PCBs in packaging, and non-closed systems, FDA's C.F. Jalinak and P.E. Corneliussen said monitoring programs in fiscal years 1973, 1974 and 1975 indicate that PCBs now contaminate far fewer types of foods than formerly, and that "the rate and level of occurrence of PCBs have declined very drastically in all categories except fish."

Comprehensive fish survey conducted in fiscal 1973 reveals which species and geographical areas are of concern in regard to PCBs, they said, but significant trends are difficult to determine. After study of primarily commercial fish species, survey found that more than 70% of samples contained no PCBs; about 3% contained over 1 ppm and 0.5% more than 5 ppm of PCBs. Jalinak and Corneliussen said that the only fish which contained more than 5 ppm of PCBs were carp, with the maximum level 20.5 ppm.

Comparison of all samples of domestic fish in FY '73-'75 showed that "the percent of fish samples containing PCBs decreased, but on the other hand, the percent of PCB-containing samples which were above 5 ppm increased. Significantly, all these samples were from the districts in the Great Lakes area, and included such species as chubs, carps and coho salmon." In terms of dietary intake, Jelenik and Corneliussen reported that levels of PCBs have been declining due to the ban on use of PCB-contaminated food packaging and that primary intake of PCBs is now freshwater fish. Consequently, they said, "we must continue to monitor for PCBs in foods and food packaging to maintain the beneficial results already achieved," and the entry of PCBs into the aquatic environment must be halted.

Canada's Department of National Health and Welfare, meanwhile, has announced establishment of temporary guidelines of 2 ppm for PCBs in fish in that country. DNHW explained that only certain freshwater species from locations in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River have a PCB problem and that levels of the chemicals in other foods have been declining.

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