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PCB Phase-Out Approved

Last week Gov. Milliken initiated a five-point plan to deal with problems stemming from the 1973 contamination of thousands of Michigan farm animals by polybrominated biphenyl, or PBB. This week the state legislature gave final approval to a bill to eliminate the manufacture, sale and use of a group of chemicals related to PBB which has been contaminating the environment for years — polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs.

PCBs are used in a variety of products, including lubricants, adhesives, laminates, textile coverings, waxes and "carbonless" duplicating paper. They are especially important, however, in electrical transformers and capacitors because of their chemical stability, fire resistance and insulating properties.

Their chemical stability is proving to be a curse as well as a blessing, unfortunately, as PCBs have entered the environment through dumping into waterways, the burning of trash containing PCBs, spillages and other means. Because they do not break down readily, they have accumulated in the environment over the last few decades, posing an ever-increasing threat to human and animal health.

Only in recent years, however, have scientists come to view PCBs as posing as much of an environmental danger as DDT. While the federal Food and Drug Administration has set 5 parts per million as the maximum level safe for human consumption, scientists have linked even smaller dosages to reproductive failures and other ailments in Michigan fish and in rhesus monkeys. Larger dosages are blamed for deaths of fish and fish-eating animals. But what's especially disturbing is that the chemicals also have been detected in rain and snow.

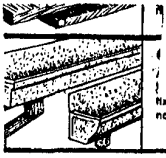
Under the state bill, which Gov. Milliken is expected to sign, no item could contain more than 250,000 parts per million (ppm) of PCBs as of July, 1,000 ppm as of January, 1977, or 100 ppm as of January, 1978. The rule will not apply to closed electrical systems, which present less threat of environmental contamination, though the director of the Department of Natural Resources will be empowered to decide when a satisfactory substitute exists and to rule, subject to approval of a joint House-Senate committee, when conversion to a substitute must be made.

Progress also has been made on other fronts in eliminating the PCB hazard. The federal Environmental Protection Agency now is taking action to reduce the threat through voluntary industrial cooperation, modification of discharge permit standards and the like. Monsanto Chemical Co., the sole domestic manufacturer of PCBs, is confining production of the chemicals to closed electrical systems and says it will end even this limited manufacture once a suitable substitute can be made — and Dow Chemical Corp. says it has developed just such a substitute.

Also promising is a technique recently developed by Dr. Dickson Liu, a biochemist with the Canada Centre for Inland Waters in Burlington, Ont. Dr. Liu has used ultrasonics to disperse PCBs in a liquid into millions of microscopic globules, after which bacteria of a special strain developed by Dr. Liu consume the carbon molecules in the chemicals, rendering them harmless. He hopes to have his technique ready for industrial use in another year.

In the meantime, Michigan, which has established itself as leader in environmental legislation, has made itself a leader in efforts to eliminate a potentially very dangerous health hazard from the environment.

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