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PCB problem illustrates woeful national ignorance

It's really difficult to know what the best solution is for disposing of the PCB-contaminated soil along 210 miles of North Carolina highways, including that along a four-to-six mile stretch of N.C. 49 North in Person County. It's particularly difficult because the people you would expect to have some expertise in such matters cannot even agree on whether the PCB in question presents a health risk to North Carolina citizens.

For example, over in Halifax County where Robert E. (Buck) Ward Jr. of Raleigh was being tried last week on charges of being an accessory and conspirator in the PCB dumpings (he was acquitted of all counts by a jury this week), two doctors gave corrobarative testimony regarding the threat of PCB to humans and animals. Both said they felt the PCB indeed posed no such threat and should be left where it is.

The testimony appeared to be significant in that both doctors — Dr. Leonard Goldwater and Dr. E. Emmett Kelly — have had experience in treating patients exposed to heavy concentrations of PCB. Dr. Goldwater has been a consultant with the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences on environmental problems. Dr. Kelly formerly was with Monsanto Chemical Co., which used to manufacture PCB.

Dr. Kelly told the court that for 29 years he regularly examined Monsanto employees who he said were "practically bathing in this stuff (PCB)" and that he found no health problems other than a form of acne.

Dr. Goldwater said he had examined thousands of people who had been exposed to PCB without ill effects.

Responding to a question as to wether the PCB dumped in North Carolina could cause cancer, Dr. Goldwater said, "The probability is so remote that everyone should forget it. The harm done by frightening everyone is much worse than the long-term chemical threat." Dr. Kelly agreed that the amount of the chemical dumped along N.C. roadways is not a significant health threat.

On the other side of the coin, Dr. Renate Kimbrough, a pathologist-toxicologist with the federal Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, testified that her laboratory experiments showed that rats and mice developed liver cancer and other maladies after they were fed PCB. She said she deduced from those experiments that the PCB on N.C. roads "could cause harm" to humans and animals.

So, who is to be believed? And posing that question is not meant to suggest in this instance that the conclusion of Drs. Goldwater and Kelly are any more or less valid than the conclusion of Dr. Kimbrough or vice versa. But the diversity of opinion on the N.C. PCB goes to point out just how incredibly unknowledgeable this nation is about the myriad chemicals that are used (and misused) daily all around us. Consequently, as the PCB problem aptly illustrates, we are almost totally unprepared to deal certainly and effectively with accidents involving toxic or potencially toxic chemicals.

North Carolina already has spent between $1 million and $2 million, according to Gov. James B. Hunt Jr., just trying to get a handle on the PCB mess. The Governor suggests that the disposal of the contaminated soil may entail yet another $3 million, and even now no one is quite sure about the best disposal method-in-place treatment, storage in multiple sites or at one large site.

Certainly, the Governor's position of having to make the ultimate decision is not an enviable one, particularly in view of the apparent fact that when it comes to PCB, and many other chemicals, no one knows for sure what the deuce they're talking about. Least of all, so it seems, the federal Environmental Protection Agency which has got to be one of the most wishy-washy agencies in the whole federal bureaucracy.

We trust a satisfactory solution to the PCB problem can be attained. Duly beyond that, we would like to see the State of North Carolina use the PCB episode as a springboard to taking the lead in the development of sound meaningful knowledge about toxic chemicals and how to deal with them. Because no one else seems to be adequately doing the job.

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