

JAN 28 1976

Still a menace

PCBs going out

It is welcome news that the Monsanto Corp. plans to phase out production of the PCB group of toxic chemicals that have proved an ecological disaster to our Great Lakes.

PCBs have been around since 1930, but it was not until the mid-1960s that they were recognized as a serious peril to the environment. Since then, the more that has been learned, the greater the justification for deep concern.

Last fall, Nathaniel P. Reed, an assistant secretary of the interior, told a scientific conference in Chicago that "with the present preponderance of PCBs, the lifespan of the Great Lakes fishery will be limited to a single generation."

Hardly any area of the United States has been immune to the insidious PCB plague. Even the famed Yukon River in Alaska has been found afflicted. But Lake Michigan has the highest concentration — so high fishermen have been warned against eating more than one meal of fish weekly. Despite such warnings, it is estimated that from one source or another half the population of the United States now carries traces of PCBs in body fat.

Environmentalists have tried attacking the PCB menace in a variety of ways, and currently in the Michigan Legislature is a bill intended to stringently regulate sale and manufacture of the chemicals. Gov. William G. Milliken urged its prompt adoption in his State of the State message this month.

The word that Monsanto plans to phase out production should not deter lawmakers from acting on the bill. The company was not specific about when it would shut down production of PCBs, saying only that it would do so when satisfied that the electrical power supply industry's needs for an alternative have been met. Encouragement on that front has come from Dow Chemical Co., which said it has developed a silicone liquid that can be used as a PCB substitute in electrical transformers.

While it is heartening that the conclusion of PCB production is at least in sight, that is hardly cause for rejoicing. The PCBs that we live with now will be part of the environment for years to come. But this is a case in which a stop will be at least a start in the right direction.

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