What to do about PCB:

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Japan's wonder chemical big polluter

By JOHN R. WALKER

TOKYO — One of the chemicals which helped underpin the Japanese economic miracle now, ironically, has been found to be one of the biggest and most serious polluters of the Japanese islands.

An inter-departmental survey just released has shown that the Japanese archipelago is far more extensively contaminated with PCB — polychlorinated biphenyl — than once feared. Many areas have 10 times the government — set guidelines for such contamination.

It was one thing to hold the world's record for deaths from PCB poisoning as a [illegible] bran [illegible] to [illegible] e [illegible] are the highest in the world, is quite another thing.

Alarm felt

The government of Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka is said to be alarmed. Its concerned departments have issued instructions against fishing in certain areas and against the use of certain transformers and condensers which have made Japan's name on the international electrical marketplace.

Polychlorinated biphenyl, or PCB, is a highly stable compound with good electrical insulating capacity and other proprieties useful in transformers, condensers and other electrical appliances, especially in making them smaller and lighter. It is also used in ink, paint and carbon paper.

Unfortunately PCB does not easily dissolve and in waste form accumulates in the environment, particularly in fish, birds, and even in human beings. In the latter, the symptoms are edema of the upper eyelid, nausea, vomiting, weakness of the limbs, arthritis and dermal symptoms.

In the Kanemi rice bran oil incident of 1968, over 1,081 patients have been found, while more than 16 people have died of the puisoning.

The Kanemi case resulted from PCB used as a heating medium, leaking from a pipe into food processing equipment, and affecting those who consumed this widely-used food oil in their cooking.

Trouble ahead

This latest report foreshadows trouble for industry and new illness for people.

It isn't that scientists here haven't been warning government and industry of the problems which PCB was going to produce. Last April one of the most outspoken younger scientists and pollution experts, Jun Ui of Tokyo University, accused the Japanese chemical industry of pretending blindness to the fact that PCB is a dreadful poison well known overseas.

As a result of the oil bran case and the warnings of people like Jun Ui, contamination has been found in various quantities in such things as beef, eggs, whalemeal, candy, powdered milk rice, and even mother's milk.

Such is the impact of economic success these days in Japan, that PCB has been used, in one form or the other, in 54 industrial plants by 39 firms in 19 out of Japan's 47 prefectures. It will be quite a mess for Tanaka's government to clean up.

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