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PCB: Let's turn off the tap

A New York State hearing examiner has just concluded that an adult could assimilate more than half his safe lifetime limit of polychlorinated biphenyls — PCBs — by eating one six-ounce helping of Hudson River eel. The PCBs were dished into the Hudson by two factories of the General Electric Company, which uses the chemicals in making fireproof electric capacitors, and eels are not the only creatures PCBs find their way into. Striped bass taken out of the river at the Tappan Zee Bridge, more than a hundred miles south of the plants, have been found to contain enough PCBs to make them unsafe to eat. PCBs have been found in coho salmon from Lake Ontario, in fish-based chicken feed, in randomly tested human beings.

The General Electric discharges, which are the only known source of PCBs in the Hudson, ought to stop. The company insists that there is no adequate substitute for PCBs, no other way to dispose of them, and no immediate prospect of eliminating the discharges short of shutting down its two plants, which employ 1,200 workers; unfortunately, these contentions seem to have the support of Gov. Hugh Carey. We'd point out that hundreds of appliances manufactured in Japan, and approved as safe by Underwriters Laboratory, contain capacitors made without PCBs — which are banned in that country. And whether or not it is possible to prohibit PCBs completely, as Japan has done, it ought to be possible to dispose of them in some way that does not pollute a recovering river and contaminate a source of food.

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