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Editorials:

PCB And Policy

The Environmental Protection Agency's sudden policy reversal on phosphate-laced detergents didn't make sense to a lot of people. We must certainly hope the federal anti-pollution won't be led into making any such blunder in the matter of paperboard recycling.

The fact is, dosages of phosphates in laundry detergents have contributed heavily to the loading of the country's surface waters with organic materials. Eliminating or greatly reducing the phosphorous content of liquid wastes is one obvious way to battle pollution and eutrophication of precious water resources.

So governmental units everywhere began to ban or limit the use of phosphates in cleaning products. But the US Surgeon General a couple of weeks ago made the upsetting statement that substitute ingredients developed to replace phosphates "clearly constitute a health hazard" if swallowed, inhaled or introduced into the eyes.

Whereupon, to the surprise of many of us, the Environmental Protection Agency switched. EPA had been urging people to stop using detergents with phosphates; now suddenly EPA suggests that we all continue to use them. Now EPA says it favors having the federal government spend an extra half-billion dollars to help communities build treatment facilities to remove the phosphate from waste waters.

Agencies of government, of course, have no money except what they extract from taxpayers. So what EPA is saying here — instead of telling people to use soap and a little elbow grease — or encouraging detergent manufacturers to develop products kids can sniff or put on cereal if they like — is that we should go on putting phosphate-laden waste water into the nation's sewers and then spend extra billions for treatment operations to try to get it back out.

Fortunately, a great many communities are not switching but are going ahead with their phosphate detergent bans.

Dr. Jesse Steinfield, to be sure, has a responsibility as surgeon general to guard the public health, just as William P. Ruckelshaus as EPA administrator has a duty to work for a healthful environment. Their efforts can and should be complementary.

It seems to us that in the light of the Public Health Service discoveries, the surgeon general might have called for printed warnings on boxes of any offending detergents unsafe for internal use or for washing one's face.

And the EPA boss might well have reacted by urging faster action to find safe, phosphate-free products.

As it turned out, instead of keeping pressure on the chemical companies to produce suitable substitutes, the federal government has tried to give phosphate detergents a reprieve. Says New York City's unhappy environmental protection administrator, "The best news a polluter can get from government is an invitation to do nothing, and that's the word the detergent industry got."

We bring all this up again because *now* the Food and Drug Administration has just reported that a persistent poison called PCB has been getting into the nation's market baskets in potentially unsafe amounts because some food packagers were using recycled paperboard products containing it.

In this instance, FDA officials have proceeded sensibly to find the source of the PCB — principally certain inks and copying paper coatings, it appears. And the sole manufacturer of the dangerous chemical has announced that it will no longer be sold for use except in closed systems, so that products that get to consumers will not contain it.

Perhaps we will be able to avoid any major health hazard with PCB, which is fortunate. Otherwise, the way things have been going, we'd probably have one agency telling us to call off paper recycling activities and another one suggesting we develop expensive poison control centers to treat PCB victims.

PASO, ROBLES, CALIF.
PRESS
D. 8,000

OCT 4 1971

Phosphates okay recycled paper NAY

By WILLIAM B. MEAD

WASHINGTON (UPI) — For the second time this month, an industry move designed to improve the environment and please the government has unexpectedly proved a possible menace to public health.

On Sept. 15, U.S. Surgeon General Jesse L. Steinfeld advised housewives to use phosphate detergents after all, although acknowledging that phosphates contribute to lake deterioration.

The government has encouraged detergent makers for years to find substitutes for phosphates. *But Steinfeld said* one substitute, NTA, might cause cancer and the second type was so caustic it could kill children who might eat it.

Monday, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said it found unacceptably high levels of the industrial chemical PCBs in shredded wheat and noodles. The PCBs came from food packages *made of recycled* paper.

The government has encouraged use of recycled paper to reduce waste and litter. The mottled gray cardboard made of recycled material is widely used in food packaging. But the FDA said its use may have to be restricted if tests now underway indicate a widespread hazard.

PCBs, short for polychlorinated biphenyls, have caused liver damage and birth defects in laboratory rodents. Although harm to human beings has not been proved, the FDA has barred as hazardous any food with more than 5 parts per million PCBs.

An FDA spokesman said the food packages contained hundreds of parts per million PCBs. Enough was picked up by the shredded wheat and noodles to top the 5 parts per million safety level.

The agency said it was testing crackers, breaded cereals, macaroni, pretzels, potato chips, cereals, baking mixes, dried milk, dessert mixes, unflavored gelatin, cookies, rice, chocolate and cocoa products, grated cheese, dried fruits and frozen juices, all of which are boxed in recycled paperboard.

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