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# Environmental extremists raise old 'PCB bugaboo'

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All of a sudden, for no evident reason, new scare stories about an old bugaboo are popping up here, there and everywhere.

Until recently, polychlorinated biphenyls — PCBs for short — were slowly fading from a fright scene orchestrated by environmental extremists and their knee-jerk media handmaidens.

And why not fade away? U.S. production of PCBs (solely by Monsanto Chemical) stopped in 1977. PCB counts in meat, fish, fowl and our own carcasses have since fallen steadily.

More to the point, the alarm criers have yet to produce real proof that PCBs are (or ever were) a significant human health hazard. Public skepticism has slowly replaced what once was blind faith in the eco-freaks' massive scare campaigns.

Hence PCBs seemed destined to join in limbo some of the other overblown environmental terrors that failed to stand the test of truth and time — such as cancer-causing cranberries, sinister saccharine or even non-biodegradable colored toilet paper.

Why, then, the curious revival of PCB scare stories? Examples:

1. In Chicago's dirty river, Army engineers found PCBs beyond EPA limits in upstream bottom sludge, and the Tribune's ever-zealous Casey Bukro gave it the full treatment — including the time-worn (but dubious) fright phrase that "tests showed PCBs could cause birth defects and cancer."

2. In Lansing, Mich., state health minions chose to renew ultra-cautious advisories about eating Great Lakes fish, despite steady declines in PCB counts. Gobbling the bait, the Associated Press spread a typically unjustified alarm story almost certain to create needless confusion.

3. In Indianapolis, the Star — which dotes on big exposes fashioned from small truths — front-paged a long emotional article about "frustrated" Bloomington residents "fighting" left-over "PCB pollution."

No need to bore you with more such samplings, except to venture this guess: There'll be more of the same!

Why? Well, no one can ever be sure about inner motives. But pragmatic old watchers of the eco crowd have a pretty good idea. In recent weeks the Food and Drug Administration quietly revived and began to move again toward a reduction of PCB tolerances in fish from 5 to 2 parts per million, an effort that last year was nervously shelved when outraged fishermen — both sport and commercial — stirred a storm of protest and demanded ever more insistently that the FDA (and EPA) produce evidence that PCBs truly are a serious human health hazard.

That's the one challenge the FDA, EPA and supportive alarm criers and media parrots have persistently dodged since PCBs replaced DDTs as the Bugbear-of-the-Moment about a decade ago. It's a challenge they don't dare face because hard, credible evidence of human toxicity simply isn't there. At least I haven't been able to find anything that is validly worrisome in 10 years of persistent, in-depth research.

Yes, PCBs are toxic to a degree. But so is table salt when taken excessively, and scientists who deal in cold facts, careful controls during research and unemotional conclusions will tell you that the two substances may well be about equally toxic.

Do PCBs really cause cancer? It's highly doubtful. All the FDA and EPA spokesmen will say without equivocation is that PCBs can be made to cause cancer in animals. That view is based on a single scientific study which had some dubious aspects.

Against that one study's findings, a similar study concluded that PCBs did NOT cause cancer in animals. Monsanto scientists have cited no less than seven studies "done in the U.S. of groups of people exposed to PCB, none of which found PCBs to cause cancer in humans."

The charge that PCBs cause human birth defects is almost as fragile, deriving from studies of PCBs effects on monkeys.

Yet invariably both of these gross distortions — if not flat untruths — appear in the general press whenever PCBs can be maneuvered into print.

Surely FDA and EPA chiefs know in their hearts that PCBs are nowhere near the hazard to human health that the environmental and media Chicken Littles have led the country to believe.

Why, then, do they persist in abetting the fiction — yes, even nourishing it?

Well, it may be cynical to say but thousands of bureaucratic jobs depend on writing and enforcing definitions, rules, decrees, studies and regulations ad infinitum that concern PCBs. Give this useful old culprit a clean bill and what happens to all those jobs — especially with a tough President and hard-nosed budget director searching for ways to restrain capricious regulators and fire needless bureaucrats?

It makes utterly no sense to cut PCB tolerances from 5 to 2 ppm when there's no real proof of significant human health hazard even at the higher figure. Yet that's precisely what FDA is trying to do again on fish and shellfish — and will succeed unless massive outrage is expressed by a long-fooled public, led by sport anglers who are the real targets of the most extreme eco-activists involved in this hassle.

They're the ones who already are propagandizing school kids to believe that fishing is a cruel and inhuman sport.

If you're angry — and you ought to be! — don't bother to write the FDA. That won't do much good. For upcoming hearings on dropping the PCB limits they've very shrewdly limited all comment to a single issue, i.e., how much food loss will occur. We're not allowed to reopen that old can of worms and challenge them to prove the true dangers of PCBs.

But do write to your Congressmen and U.S. Senators — and to President Reagan. The industrial, commercial and social mischief that environmental extremists have wrought in recent years has cost the rest of us millions of dollars, literally. It's past time to apply some hard common sense to these things.

A Hoosier Outdoors by Al Spiers



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# Says PCBs from Con Ed hurt firemen

By RUTH STOUT and PAUL MESKIL

Several firemen suffered skin rashes after they inhaled PCB-polluted smoke from transformer fires at Con Edison plants, a toxic-chemical expert testified yesterday.

Industrial hygienist Michael McCann said the sealed transformers contain PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), which are used to insulate and cool the transformers. He said the amount of PCBs legally allowed in the transformers is 10 times the amount permitted by federal regulations for use in the open air.

The PCBs pose a triple threat in fires, McCann said. They can be absorbed through the skin of people in the vicinity. They can be inhaled after evaporating into the air. And, at high temperatures, they change into other, even more toxic chemicals, one of which is believed to be dioxin, the hazardous ingredient of the military defoliant Agent Orange.

McCANN IS AN OFFICIAL of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, a coalition of health professionals and labor unions, including the Uniformed Firefighters Association. At a hearing of the New York State Commission on Dioxin, he said: "Firefighters are being treated like Vietnam vets. They are being exposed to toxic chemicals and are not being told about it."

More than 100 Vietnam veterans attended the hearing at the Brooklyn War Memorial. Their problems included cancer, kidney and liver disorders, stomach cramps, chronic illness, numbness in the extremities, loss of sex drive, abnormal sensitivity to light, skin rashes and birth defects in their children.

Viet vet Fred Nachshen of Queens and his wife, Louise, were accompanied by their 5-year-old twins, one of whom has an open spine and walks with the aid of braces and crutches—the result, they charged, of birth defects caused by Nachshen's exposure to Agent Orange.

McCANN SAID THERE were four recent Con Ed transformer fires at which firemen were exposed to chemical contamination: July 7 at the Hell Gate plant in the Bronx; July 8 at a Con Ed facility in Brooklyn; July 11 at a Staten Island plant, and Sept. 19 at a plant on 14th St.

McCann said firemen have difficulty tracing the source of various health problems because Fire Department records seldom list the dangerous chemicals that may have been involved. ■

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