Now, a Dread Pollution in the Wind and Rain

By Robert Gillette
Science Writer

A bizarre new kind of pollution is blowing in the wind and falling in the rain, and scientists are finding it in some alarming places.

Although it is not a pesticide, the new chemical fallout is turning up in some of the same places around the globe as DDT.

So far, scientists have found the new pollutant in the feathers of Swedish eagles and the fat of Arctic falcons.

It has cropped up in wildlife in Britain and the Netherlands, and in the eggs and fatty tissue of 11 species of birds along the North American Coast from San Francisco Bay to Baja California.

The new chemical — remarkably similar to DDT in its composition — has been found in a few samples of milk from nursing mothers in Colorado, Los Angeles and Berkeley.

It even appears in the needles of pine trees.

The pollutant is actually a family of toxic industrial [illegible] polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCB for short. PCB does not occur naturally in the environment.

In the United States, Monsanto Chemical Company [illegible] PCB under the trade name [illegible]

PCB is widely used in plastic, asphalt paving, synthetic rubber, printer's ink, coatings for paper and fabric, automobile-body sealants, varnishes, waxes, floor tiles, adhesives and a cooling fluid.

Precisely how PCB escapes into the environment is still a mystery, says Dr. Robert Risebrough, a pesticide and wildlife specialist at the University of California, Berkeley.

One likely source is refuse burning. Another is PCB production itself. But Monsanto has declined to say whether PCB emissions occur at its two manufacturing plants, and if so, how much escapes.

And contrary to a statement by Monsanto, there are commercial uses of PCB which release the chemical directly to air, water and soil.

The company statement, aroused by scientists' reports of PCB pollution, said:

"The common uses of commercial PCB would not normally lead to its release into the natural environment."

And it added that PCBs "are not sprayed or dusted on crops, woodlands, or any other areas, as are pesticides."

However, a technician with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in San Francisco said PCBs "are used in a number of pesticides to extend their shelf life and in making the chemicals more effective when sprayed."

The technician said PCB is listed on government registered pesticide labels as an inert ingredient, although amounts of PCB can cause skin eruptions, liver damage, coma, and death in humans.

There is mounting evidence, says Dr. Risebrough, that PCB "can be carried, like DDT, far and wide over the globe by air currents."

Both chemicals lodge in the oils and fatty tissue of fish, birds and mammals in the sea and on land.

Recent laboratory tests show that PCB stimulates hormone breakdown in mammals and birds (as does DDT). This strongly suggests that PCB could damage the reproduction of birds as drastically as DDT.

Dr. Risebrough sums up what is and what is not known about PCB in the latest issue of Environment magazine, a scientist's publication.

While there is no evidence at present that PCB has harmed humans or wildlife, scientists fear it has the potential to do so.

Ecologists recall that a case of environmental damage against DDT has taken nearly 20 years to build.

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