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RUSSELL TRAIN, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), said at a press conference December 22 that PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are "one hell of a problem" and that his agency would do what it could to ban their release to the environment. A month earlier, the EPA had noted that ten million pounds of PCBs are released to the environment each year and that the toxic chemicals had been found in a number of city drinking water supplies. The federal government's power to restrict use of the material is limited, however. The Monsanto Company, sole U.S. manufacturer of PCBs, sells only to customers who claim the chemicals will not be released -- most sales are to electrical equipment manufacturers, who use the PCBs as an insulating and cooling fluid. But General Electric is among the worst polluters of the Hudson River with PCBs, and imported materials are used in printing inks and other noncontained materials. General Electric claimed that PCB levels in Hudson River fish had been exaggerated (New York Times, December 10), but several New York State officials called for a ban on releases. The assistant secretary of the interior called for a federal ban, and the Environmental Defense Fund urged the Food and Drug Administration to sharply limit allowable levels; but in the absence of new federal legislation, such as the proposed toxic chemical control act, there is little the federal government can do. PCBs are known to be toxic to human beings, are highly stable in the environment, and are concentrated by lower plants and animals. Dow Chemical and McGraw Edison claim to have a substitute material which is chemically similar to PCBs but which is more easily broken down in the environment (Chemical and Engineering News, December 8).

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