Nov. 10, 1975

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PCEs, Again

The story of polychlorinated biphenyls—PCBs—is another environmental tale that may have been told too late. PCBs are chemically related to DDT, but they are more persistent in nature. The sole U.S. manufacturer of the industrial chemicals, the Monsanto Company, voluntarily reduced output in 1972 to amounts needed for essential purposes, after scientists revealed that PCBs are highly toxic. Now comes the news that the amounts in the environment have declined scarcely at all, apparently because of the persistence of PCBs and because there are fewer restrictions on them in Europe than in the United States. Worse than that, however, new studies at the University of Wisconsin Primate Research Laboratory shows that PCBs are toxic at much lower levels than had been thought. The entire food chain could be affected, as well as humans who may be individually exposed to the chemicals. Few disagree now that there needs to be a complete phaseout of PCBs as soon as possible. No one can say with confidence how much damage might already be in store even if the phaseout began immediately. And the PCB case emphasizes once again the need for Congress to pass a strong toxic substances control act that would assure that no tale need to be told about some future chemical menace that went on the market first and underwent checking only after signs of damage started to appear.

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PCB Problem

Readers of the Poughkeepsie Journal are familiar with the story of poisonous chemicals called PCB's and the possible hazard they pose to communities through contamination of drinking water.

The PCB's (polycholrinated biphenyls) can cause poisonous effects in humans when they reach certain levels. They have caused cancer in rats during experimentation.

The PCB's causing the most concern in this area are found in the Hudson River and they come mainly from the General Electric Co. upstream near Albany.

Two local communities, Poughkeepsie and Rhinebeck, are among those drawing water from the Hudson River. It is time that a complete investigation be made into the situation to see if the fears expressed by many experts hold up.

The Hudson River is not alone in this problem. High PCB counts have been found in the Great Lakes and elsewhere. Now the Environmental Protection Agency is getting into the act.

One consultant to the agency, Dr. John L. Buckley, calls the situation urgent. Concentrations are higher than previously believed, he told a congressional subcommittee.

We think that Congress should provide that agency with the tools needed to curtail and eliminate the PCB problem. It will require a good deal of effort to track down the various sources of the pollution and a good deal of clout to shut it off. But the question of the health of the people is paramount here, and no governmental foot-dragging is acceptable.

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