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What's worse than DDT?

PCBs under fire as a menace to our environment and health

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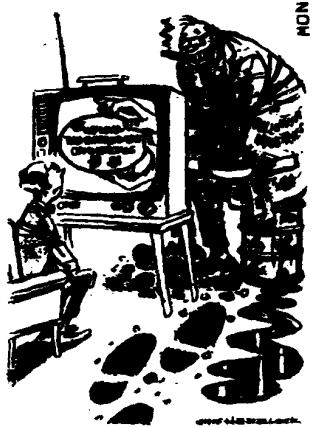
perspective



'Look — clean, clean hands'

DANGER!

The word loomed from headlines again this month with another threat to the environment in focus.

The newly spotlighted menace is a group of industrial pollutants which many experts feel are a more serious threat than the insecticide DDT.

They belong to a chemical family called PCBs — a grandiosely short version of the name Polychlorinated Biphenyls. And they seem to be everywhere.

PCBs have been widely used as insulating fluids in certain electrical transformers and capacitors, and in hydraulic fluids, lubricants, heat-transfer fluids and as plasticizers in adhesives, sealants, printing inks, coatings and resins.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS say the PCBs have made their way into streams and lakes and have been found to cause reproductive disorders and death in fish, birds and mammals.

This week, two prominent conservation groups asked the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to reduce the amount of PCBs allowed in fresh water fish and, eventually, to ban its presence in all foods.

The Environmental Defense Fund and the National Resources Defense Council said a wide range of immunologic, endocrine, health, reproductive and other disorders, including cancer, have been linked to PCBs in workers directly exposed to them.

The federal government's only full and reliable study recently called for a continued ban on PCBs or, as warned, "the lifespan of the Great Lakes fishery will be limited to a single generation."

PCBs have made their way not only into the Great Lakes but also into rivers and lakes across the nation, and have been found in some cigarettes, two dialects and deeds to fish, birds and mammals.

HEROIC RESCUE scenes at sunset, we should not be afraid to stop fish from industrial effluents if we can stop farmers' contaminated fertilizer, declared P. Reed, assistant secretary of the Interior for fish, wildlife and parks, told a national conference on PCBs.

Reed stated that large expenditures of money to remove sediment in the Great Lakes and for other programs designed to rid fisheries and protected animals seems to jumbled if the threat from PCBs persists.

The Wall Street Journal recently commented that background behind the alarm.

PCBs have been used since 1929, but not until environmental problems in general and DDT in particular increased losses in the 1960s did PCBs finally become prominent, the Journal stated.

Subsequent of the chemicals' toxicity came to light quickly. In 1968, more than 1,000 people in Japan suffered an epidemic of a disfiguring skin disease and later was traced to rice oil heavily contaminated with PCBs.

All THE STRINGENCIES piled up, the Food and Drug Administration set maximum levels, effective in 1971, to be tolerated in foods. Elected comments may grow that the tolerances levels allowed may be too high.

The suggestion comes from University of Wisconsin's Prichard Research Center, where chemist Richard Jan puts an alarm containing as little as half the minimum allowed level and saved hair of hair, ground established laboratory and — in effect — a severe warning spoke.

Moreover, even low levels of PCBs in combination apparently caused disorders and visibly affecting. This includes the Food, it must were exposed to double levels over the safety limit, he also would become extremely ill," the Journal quoted Jerome H. Adney, a University of Wisconsin pathology professor.

Fish from the Great Lakes, the Hudson, Milwaukee and Ohio rivers and other waterways are showing varying PCB levels, according to the Journal's report.

THE SHIPMENTS of canned salmon from the Great Lakes recently were seized by the FDA as contaminated. But many people, namely sport fishermen, are believed to be still eating contaminated fish, despite health warnings by authorities in New York and the Midwest.

There are hints that PCBs also might cause cancer in man, "although the probability is far from having been proved," the Journal says.

One study found to be published by a physician, formerly with the federal Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, pointed the strongest indication to date that PCBs can cause liver cancer in rats.

Some scientific opposition that if the chemicals cause cancer in man, it would be only after many exposures over many years and possibly only a relatively few workers or PCB plants.

The new environmentalist groups mentioned earlier believe the evidence already is enough to warrant a total PCB ban.

THE DANGERS in some forms of chemicals have been definitely established. Examples are effects on reproduction of fish, as well as cases that the Great Lakes fish. One ecologist says there is a "strong but still unproven" case that PCBs are killing birds such as the herring gull and osprey.

Scientists now recommend, too, that PCBs in the ordinary will eventually decompose more forms of algae, with a possibly lethal increase in the chemical's toxicity and that algae and subsequent up-the-food-chain effects on higher forms of life.

The federal government apparently is beginning to PCB regulations, but environmental groups feel the action won't be enough.

Only an outright ban will bring safety, the groups say.

General Electric Co. has said there is no satisfactory substitute for PCBs in electrical gear, at least in the near future, and is currently designed. But PCB opponents say engineers can design, build and implement, and GE argues that the risk of burning down is worse of these insulating fluids outweighs the risk of leaking them.

NOT SO, the environmentalists reply. Electric hoists may be of a static heavy load.

And the federal officials, fired, comment. "We should not be afraid to stop fish from industrial effluents if we can stop farmers' contaminated fertilizer," they say.

In any case, the outside "PCB" seems to be becoming more and more familiar — just as "DDT" did.

They are the common trade names of what seems to be an endless chemical family of substances that have one common alike and the environmentalists find traps to allow