THE CAPITAL TIMES
MADISON, WISC.
D. 45,029

AUG 28 1975

PCBs 'Everywhere'—But Use Declining

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The industrial chemical known as "PCB" is everywhere a Department of Natural Resources hearing was told this morning.

And while PCB use is declining, the DNR's Stanton Kleinert noted, the chemical will remain in the environment for some time to come.

Kleinert, head of the DNR's surveillance section, was the first witness at a two-day department hearing on proposed rules to ban or sharply curtail the discharge of PCBs into rivers, lakes and streams.

"We anticipate PCBs in the environment will progressively decline with declining use," Kleinert told the audience of about 35, including representatives of industries which use PCBs.

PCBs — also known as aerochlors — are polychlorinated biphenyls, a chemical used widely in industrial products ranging from hydraulic and transformer fluids to paints, paper, inks, adhesives and food packaging.

Researchers have linked heavy doses of PCBs to reproductive failures in test animals.

The Food and Drug Administration has set 5 parts-per-million as the upper limit for PCBs in poultry, fish and shellfish, and lower levels for milk and dairy products.

Kleinert said the DNR had also found that fish taken from parts of Green Bay, Lake Michigan, the Upper Mississippi and Fox Rivers, all exceeded the 5 ppm tolerance level; in recent months, thousands of pounds of the contaminated fish have been seized and banned from sale.

The chemical also turned up in effluents from sewage treatment plants and pulp and paper mills, aluminum foundries, sediments in harbors and streams near industrialized areas, and even in snow, Kleinert said.

The source of the snow contamination in Racine, Kenosha, Madison and Milwaukee was probably fallout from incinerators burning PCB-contaminated paper, Kleinert suggested.

In most cases, he said, the levels of the chemical detected were in "trace amounts," but in sediments of the Fox River near Portage, the levels reached 72 ppm. The likely source: an NCR-Appleton Paper Co. plant which until 1971 used PCB in its carbonless copy paper.

PCB is also used in the production of recycled paper.

And a "premature" ruling requiring industries to reach "unattainable levels" of PCB control could cause paper mills to reject all waste paper for recycling, warned R. A. Shade of Green Bay, president of Shade Information Systems, a supplier of paper to businesses.

Shade said PCB use in the paper industry had greatly diminished in recent years and urged that the state do more research on monitoring and controlling PCBs before enacting a total ban.

But Albert K. Forster of Madison, a spokesman for the Izaak Walton League, said his organization supported a ban until the chemical could be proven safe. The earth is being used as a "laboratory" for thousands of industrial chemicals, he warned, and the government should improve its testing before new compounds are released into the environment.

Henry P. Roberts, deputy regional director for the FDA in Minneapolis, said PCBs represent no immediate health hazard to humans at current levels, but the chemicals are "toxic, persistent and widespread" and requires controls to avoid long-term dangers.

State Health Officer Dr. George Handy said a 1971 warning, advising people not to eat more than one meal a week of fish containing more than 5 ppm of PCB, is still in effect.

The hearings will continue Friday, starting at 8:30 a.m. in Room 421 South of the State Capitol.

MONS 032828