Chemicals

HAZARDS OF PCBs CALLED OVERBLOWN, CAUSING NEEDLESS DISPOSAL PROBLEMS

TAMPA, Fla. — (By an Environment Reporter staff correspondent) — The hazards of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are overblown, causing needless disposal problems, according to scientists, engineers, and Environmental Protection Agency officials speaking at a hazardous waste management seminar.

PCBs are a "political pollutant" — a substance which EPA, the Food and Drug Administration, or some other federal agency has banned, resulting in no one wanting to touch, or dispose of the material, said John Dickinson, chief of the hazardous waste section of EPA Region IV in Atlanta, Ga. Dickinson told the October 15-19 seminar, sponsored by the Toxic Substances Control Institute, that "political pollutants" are ones which can be safely and securely disposed of, but ones which industry does not want to handle or "take the heat" from society for disposal.

Dickinson said the reason for concern about PCBs is that the substance is bioaccumulative and persistent in the environment and does not break down into simpler chemicals.

Dickinson said, however, that other chemicals are much more dangerous than PCBs, but just have not received the media attention that PCBs have.

He said that incineration of PCBs is the "sleeping giant" because EPA has not yet begun evaluating emissions from burning PCBs, and EPA does not know the products of its combustion.

PCBs Caught in Political Controversy

Dickinson's views were supported by Raymond D. Harbison, director of the toxic substances control laboratory at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. Harbison said PCBs are totally immobile and not carcinogenic to humans. According to Harbison, benzpyrene and other chemicals are far more hazardous to humans and the environment than PCBs and are proven human carcinogens.

Harbison pointed to many cases of human ingestion of PCBs without resulting carcinogenic side effects.

An April 1979 EPA environmental impact statement and economic impact analysis of the PCB regulations said that PCBs are carcinogenic to rats and mice and "pose a carcinogenic risk to man."

"The hysteria and money spent over PCBs are not worth the human health effects," Harbison said. "I see no reason why we are having problems disposing of PCB," he said in referring to industry problems in obtaining PCB disposal permits because of public opposition to disposal facilities.

PCBs, the only substance specifically outlawed by Congress in the Toxic Substances Control Act, are the target of very strict federal disposal regulations.

Robert Landmesser, president of Advanced Environmental Technology Corp., Morrisplains, N.J., recommended that industry get rid of its transformers and capacitors containing PCBs as soon as possible. Many seminar participants from industry said they had large quantities of PCBs stored onsite and were looking for permanent ways to dispose of the substance.

Industry Must Police Itself

Industry must police its own hazardous waste transportation and disposal activities more than it ever has in the past, according to Landmesser.

Landmesser said increased federal enforcement of EPA's soon-to-be released hazardous waste regulations (Current Developments, October 19, p. 1423) and the Department of Transportation's hazardous materials handling rules will be an incentive for industry to police itself to avoid expensive prosecution and violations.

According to Landmesser, of all the federal agencies his firm comes in contact with, DOT has the strongest and largest enforcement staff to deal with the hazardous materials handling regulations. He said that DOT intends to upgrade its enforcement staff for the regulations. He said that, because DOT's hazardous materials handling regulations are strong, consistent, and already on the books, unlike EPA's yet-to-be-released hazardous waste regulations, firms must comply with all aspects of the DOT regulations. "Compliance with DOT's (hazardous materials handling) regulations is imperative from top to bottom," Landmesser said.

Landmesser recommended that industries not mix different types of their wastes into one waste stream. "Classification and separation of materials will be most important for offsite disposal," he said.

Landmesser also said that industry generally has "not had a consistent moral hazardous waste policy." He said in the past industry may have been disposing of its wastes legally under then-existing laws, but quite often industry knew it was polluting groundwater and land and endangering the environment (April 13, p. 2328). He said industry has been legally, but not morally, correct in the way it handled hazardous wastes.

Discussions at the seminar also focused on the difficulty of siting hazardous waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities.

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