EPA reports drop in levels of PCBs

But study says almost everyone has traces

From Wire Services

WASHINGTON – Nearly all Americans have traces of the industrial pollutant PCB in their bodies, but there has been a sharp decline in the number with relatively high amounts of the dangerous substance, the Environmental Protection Agency said yesterday.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, were widely used as fire retardants in electrical equipment from their introduction in 1929 until 1977, when the government – in compliance with the Toxic Substances Control Act – ordered manufacturers to stop producing them. The basis of the ban was evidence from laboratory-animal studies that the chemicals caused cancer and had other harmful side effects when people were exposed to them after the compounds escaped into the environment.

Under a federally funded study, scientists measured PCB levels in human tissue by collecting a representative sample of surgical specimens and autopsy material from hospitals in every state except Hawaii and Alaska. The fat in these samples was then analyzed for the presence of the PCB "family" of 209 closely related chemicals.

The EPA said the percentage of people whose fat contains more than 3 parts per million of the hazardous chemicals dropped dramatically between 1977 and 1981.

In 1977, the year of the ban, said Don Clay, an acting assistant administrator of the EPA, 8 percent of the population had more than 3 parts per million of PCBs in their tissues – up from 2.7 percent of the population in 1972. But in 1981, the most recent year for which figures are available, only 1 percent of the population had that much PCBs in their body fat.

Clay warned, however, that an estimated 250 million pounds of PCBs are still in use. Because these compounds take decades to decompose, he said, it will be years before their health risks completely disappear."

Agency officials hailed the drop as evidence that their campaign to get the once widely used chemical compounds out of the environment was working.

"This is a dramatic example of the improvements that environmental regulations are bringing us," Clay said.

However, the new study found that all Americans now carry detectable levels of PCBs in their fat tissues. In 1972, the agency estimated that 85 percent of Americans had detectable levels of PCBs in their bodies.

Tests have linked PCBs to reproductive failures, gastric disorders, skin lesions, tumors and other problems in laboratory animals. While there is no evidence of human health effects from low levels of PCBs, Clay said, "No one says it is good for you."

The EPA has been struggling to develop rules to phase out existing uses of PCBs. After a court overturned the first regulations in 1980 for being too lax, the agency came back with revised standards that will require 1.5 million pieces of electrical transformers and capacitors to be replaced in the next six years.

Dr. John Craddock, an official of Monsanto Co., the nation's largest producer of PCBs before the ban, said the EPA study showed "PCBs are not the mad-dog chemical that people once thought they would be."

He said the EPA study on humans follows reports showing lower levels of PCBs in lakes and fish in the mid-1970s, after companies had begun to phase out PCB manufacturing.

0755132

TOWOLDMON0059817