PCB Controls Weak, Study Says

The Environmental Protection Agency is failing to control properly the only chemical Congress has considered dangerous enough to require special legislation, according to the General Accounting Office.

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) have been used widely in industry since 1929, largely in electric transformers and capacitors (devices that store electricity).

Since the chemical was developed, more than 800,000 tons of PCBs have been sold to American industry.

Various studies have associated PCBs with a variety of health problems, including liver damage, reproductive disorders and cancer, the GAO report said.

The chemical is made even more dangerous by the fact it is very persistent and can exist in the environment for years.

In 1978, 200 gallons of fluid containing PCBs in a single transformer leaked into a Montana packing plant's drainage system and were processed into animal feed and grease.

Within four months the contaminated products and the animals to which they were fed were distributed to 19 states, Canada and Japan.

The spill cost private firms an estimated $3 million. They had to destroy 800,000 chickens, 3.8 million eggs, 4,000 hogs, 74,000 bakery items, 400 tons of feed and 1.2 million pounds of grease.

"Perhaps of even greater impact on the affected companies will be the loss of public confidence and possible lawsuits stemming from the incident," the GAO reported.

But even though the EPA has been charged by Congress with the responsibility of controlling the chemical, the agency has failed to take effective action to do so, the GAO said.

"EPA missed by more than seven months its congressionally mandated deadline for issuing rules for marking and disposing of PCBs," the report said.

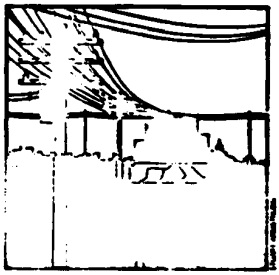
"In addition, regulations for implementing the statutory ban on PCBs were late by as much as 18 months."

Even after the regulations were issued, the GAO found, "EPA was not adequately prepared to enforce them through a coordinated inspection program."

Because the EPA does not have the resources to monitor all potential PCB facilities, "it must rely on the deterrent value of its penalties and voluntary industry efforts to help achieve widespread compliance," the report said.

However, it continued, enforcement action is slow, penalties for rule violations are reduced an average of 65 percent during settlement, and most possible PCB users have not even been informed of the regulations.

The EPA also has been slow in providing for PCB disposal facilities, the report said.



The GAO called on the EPA administrator to improve the enforcement and inspection activities of the agency and develop better controls over these activities.

The EPA also should strengthen its enforcement activities and penalties as well as assure greater industry awareness of the PCB regulations.

According to the GAO, the EPA Office of Toxic Substances officials agreed with the conclusions and recommendations of the report and are considering ways of implementing the recommendations.

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