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Paper Industry Says Banning PCBs Would Kill Recycling

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Proposed state rules that would virtually ban one of the industrial chemicals known as "PCBs" could deal a death blow to the paper recycling business in Wisconsin, paper industry spokesmen told the Department of Natural Resources Thursday.

But studies of monkeys fed doses of PCB somehow in man's exposure levels represent the chemical poses serious health risks, according to testimony by a University of Wisconsin pathologist.

The clash came at a DNR hearing on two alternative proposals by the Natural Resources Board. One would ban the discharge of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in any form into state waters. The other would restrict discharges to five parts-per-billion, as measured in 24-hour composite samples — a restriction that also amounts to a virtual ban.

The proposals come in the wake of state and federal restrictions on commercial fishing on the Mississippi River and Lake Michigan, because of the discovery of PCBs in fish at levels above the five parts-per-million considered safe by the Food and Drug Administration. State and federal authorities have also blocked sales of PCB-contaminated fish on Lake Pepin and Green Bay.

But the proposed restrictions have run into heavy opposition from the paper industry, which until 1971 used PCBs in the production of carbonless paper. Although the industry says it no longer uses the chemicals, PCBs turn up as waste discharges from the recycling of old paper.

"The adoption of either proposed regulation would be an economic catastrophe for the paper industry in Wisconsin," warned Donald L. Bach, a Madison attorney representing the Wisconsin Paper Council, the trade association for the state's 48 pulp and paper mills.

Wisconsin leads the nation in paper making and paper recycling. Bach noted, and the DNR itself is encouraging the effort by using 100 per cent recycled paper for its own stationery.

Bach called the proposed restrictions "irresponsible" and ill-conceived and charged they were "aimed most directly" at the state's waste paper recycling industry. He said they fail to recognize that the form of PCBs used in paper recycling are less persistent and more degradable than the form found to cause problems in fish.

Richard Wand of the Bergstrom Paper Co. in Neenah told waste paper dealers up about 40 per cent of his firm's fiber requirements.

A PCB ban, he said, "very simply will put virtually all paper recyclers out of the recycling business," since it would be impossible to sort out all old carbonless waste paper.

Opposition also came from representatives of the Brown Co. paper mill in East Chase, the Flambeau Paper Co. in Park Falls, and the National Association of Recycling Industries.

A spokesman for the sole U.S. manufacturer of PCBs, the Monsanto Chemical Co. of St. Louis, said his firm in 1970 stopped production of PCBs for all uses that would permit their escape to the environment.

Since 1972, the firm has manufactured the chemical only for use in electrical transformers and capacitors — "sealed systems which we believe can be controlled to a satisfactory level," said W. B. Papageorge, Monsanto's manager of product acceptability.

From a 1970 production peak of 40 million pounds, Monsanto now manufactures about 40 million pounds of PCBs a year for the electric industry, which values the chemicals — there are over 200 different forms — for their fire resistance, according to Papageorge.

But Karl Bremer of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency suggested PCBs could be supplanted by dry transformers or other substitutes.

Support for a PCB ban came from spokesmen for the Izaak Walton League, Lt. Gov. Martin Schreiber and U.S. Rep. Les Aspin (D-Rancho) Aspin cited the potential dangers to Wisconsin's dairy industry from PCB con[illegible]

Pathology Department and his studies of Rhesus monkeys show PCBs can cause health damage even at the low levels now permitted in human food.

Monkeys fed regular doses of PCBs at 2.5-ten ppms began to lose their hair and develop acne within two months, Allen reported; within four months, the females showed irregular menstrual cycles, and pregnant females frequently aborted their fetuses or miscarried.

Babies born to females fed higher doses of the chemicals were smaller than average.

Monkeys fed extremely high levels — 500 to 200 ppm — developed some of the same symptoms as those fed smaller doses, and within two or three months, many died.

Allen said he did not find a level of PCBs that is non-toxic to monkeys on a regular basis, but he said he is continuing his research in an effort to ascertain man's exposures more closely.

He said he is confident the PCBs he used for his tests were free of contaminants, which some industry spokesmen have blamed for the problem.

PCBs became a subject of international concern in 1968, when hundreds of Japanese accidentally ate rice oil laced with PCBs as the result of an industrial accident.

The Japanese suffered gastrointestinal disturbances, acne, loss of hair, ulcers and swollen joints, and babies born to affected women were discolored and smaller than normal.

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