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EPA launches major chemical cleanup effort

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency said today it is beginning a major effort to remove from the environment as rapidly as possible the chemicals known as polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs.

The chemicals have been shown to cause reproductive failures, gastric disorders and skin lesions in mammals and threaten commercial and sport fishing in several areas of the nation.

Administrator Russell Train said water contaminated with PCBs renders several species of fish incapable of reproduction. He said high levels of PCBs in fish constitute a threat to fishing in the Great Lakes, the Hudson River, the upper Mississippi and off the Southern California coast.

PCBs are fire resistant liquids used mainly as insulating fluids in electrical equipment, particularly in high-power transformers and capacitors.

No effective substitute for PCBs has been developed, but work is proceeding, Train said.

The EPA estimated 700 million pounds of PCBs have been produced in the U.S. since 1930. It said about 300 million pounds currently are in service. The remainder has been dumped in land fills, leached into the water or degraded into harmless compounds.

EPA also proposed regulations to establish a nationwide program to limit spills and other discharge of over 300 hazardous chemicals.

The proposed regulations would cover chemicals such as nitric and sulfuric acids, caustic soda, benzene, ammonia, chloroform and certain compounds of arsenic, antimony and mercury.

Although PCBs currently are used only in electrical machinery, about half the PCBs produced in the United States before 1970 were sold for use as plasticizers in paints, plastics, sealants, lubricant additives, hydraulic fluids and heat exchange fluids and for use in carbonless copy paper.

The Monsanto Co. is the sole American producer of PCBs, although numerous manufacturers use the chemicals in their products.

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