Monsanto Chemical Found In Sauget Water

By JEROME P. CURRY
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Low levels of PCBs, a toxic chemical now used mainly as a coolant in closed electrical systems, have been identified in the municipal water treatment plant at Sauget on the East Side. Monsanto's Sauget plant is the only domestic producer of PCBs.

Thomas E. Kopp, a chemist with the Office of Toxic Substances of the Environmental Protection Agency, said yesterday that Sauget was one of several places in the nation where the PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) have been identified in waterways and sewage systems.

But Kopp did not disclose the levels about which he was talking.

William B. Papageorge, manager of product acceptability for the Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co., an operating unit of Monsanto Co., told the Post-Dispatch that the levels involved "were on the order of five or six parts a billion, and that is low."

When Papageorge was asked whether he would drink a glass of water if he knew that the PCB level in that water was five to six parts a billion, he replied: "Yes and I probably have."

Papageorge said that the information on the Sauget treatment plant made public by Kopp was based on studies in the East Side community last spring. They were done by a Gainesville, Fla., consulting firm for the Environmental Protective Agency. Samples were taken at both the intake and out-take flows of the treatment plant.

Papageorge noted that the source of the low level PCB in the treatment plant also could have come from other industries in the area. All of them probably used PCBs in processes before a major reduction in PCB use in 1970.

In his paper read yesterday in Chicago at a conference on PCBs, Kopp said that at least 10 plants in the United States were releasing the material into waterways and sewage systems. He did not disclose the PCB levels about which he was talking, Papageorge said, although Monsanto Co. officers pressed him on the issue.

"I'm convinced that this is EPA's way of drawing the limelight on a convenient chemical to get their Toxic Substances Control Act through Congress," Papageorge said. "I'm convinced that existing law is sufficient to handle any problem — if existing laws were enforced."

He said that the information made public by Kopp was correct but that Kopp should have disclosed all the information available to him.

Polychlorinated biphenyls have been used commercially since 1929 — principally as an insulating fluid in electrical transformers. It wasn't until the 1960s that a potential problem was identified.

At that time, Monsanto voluntarily reduced its production of the material and began to sell it for use only as a coolant in so-called closed systems such as those used to cool transformers and capacitors.

A Monsanto spokesman said that before 1971 Monsanto sold about 80,000,000 pounds of PCBs a year to thousands of customers. Now, the company sells about 40,000,000 pounds a year to fewer than 50 manufacturers of electrical equipment.

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