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'Greatest Problem Of Chemical Age'

Scientist Warns Compound PCB Worse Threat Than Any Pesticide

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WASHINGTON — Government safety levels eventually will be set for foods containing polychlorinated biphenyls, which threaten to become a major environmental pollutant.

That's the opinion of Dr. Henry Fishback, director of the Food and Drug Administration division of pesticides.

He and other federal scientists since the first of the year have been warning that the chemical—called PCB for short—is turning up in the nation's air and water in a constantly increasing volume.

They say that it may be more of a hazard to humans and wildlife than the controversial DDT pesticide.

"PCB over the long haul may be the greatest problem compound we have," says Dr. Joseph P. Linduska, associate director of the Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife.

"It may be the greatest problem of the chemical age," he says.

Dr. Fishback believes the time is coming soon when states may be forced into establishing PCB safety levels for foods. If they don't, it is likely the federal government will step in, he says.

But first, government scientists have to find out how much PCB is entering the environment and how it gets there.

[illegible] puzzle confronts the Monsanto Chemical Co. of St. Louis, the sole U.S. manufacturer of PCB. The chemical also is produced in Europe and Japan.

Despite company disclaimers, Dr. Fishback says the chemical is being widely used in industry as an additive to plastic products, printing inks, paints, adhesives and sealants. It also is used as a fluid insulator against electricity in power transformers.

According to Dr. Fishback, Monsanto so far has declined to reveal how much PBC it produces and markets under the trade name of Aroclor.

A Commerce Department official explained that Monsanto, as sole maker of the chemical in this country, doesn't have to file production reports with the department.

According to unofficial estimates, hundreds of millions of pounds of the chemical is produced annually in the United States.

Dr. Harold Price, an analytical chemist in charge of the [illegible] state pesticide laboratory, says PCB appears to be almost as prevalent in the environment as DDT, on which [illegible] have been applied.

PCB is a petroleum derivative [illegible] and its molecular structure is almost identical to that of DDT. Also like DDT, it has long-lasting resistance to breakdown and is relatively insoluble in water.

PCB has been found to be toxic to fish and other marine life and to birds and animals. Its possible long-range effect upon man has not been determined.

And no one knows for sure how PCB is being picked up in the human food chain.

Dr. Fishback believes that considerable PCB gets into the air and water as products to which it has been added decompose and oxidize after they have been discarded into, for example, a sanitary landfill.

Through improved laboratory methods, scientists now are better able to distinguish between PCB and DDT than they had been in the past. It has been suspected that safe levels of DDT set for food had been inaccurate because researchers had been mistaking one of the chemicals for the other.

"What we need now," says Dr. Fishback, "are some benchmarks on the action and distribution of PCB so that adequate safety levels can be stablished if needed."

Also wanting more scientific data on PCB is Calvin Menzies, biochemist and toxicologist in the Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife division of pesticide registration.

"No one really knows whether the amounts of PCB that are being found are significant," he says. "We may have a lot of it out there that has little, if any, dangerous effect. On the other hand, there may be a small amount of it with a great deal of effect."

Menzies says use of PCB should be curtailed if it is found to be hazardous to man. And, in that event, he feels safety levels for the chemical in foods should be established as soon as possible.

Menzies says that Monsanto is cooperating partially in a government search for the answer to the PCB mystery of supplying some Aroclor materials for laboratory testing.

The company also is studying the possibility of using a high temperature incinerator to completely burn up discarded products containing PCB.

In addition, the company is warning industrial users of potential PCB hazards and is trying to sell them other processes which accomplish similar results.

One big user of PCB is the electric transformer industry. Since the chemical is a non-conductor of electricity, it makes an ideal transformer coolant.



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