LOS ANGELES EVENING & SUNDAY
HERALD EXAMINER
D. 512,922 SUN. 494,920

DEC 14 1975

The New Spoiler: Chemical PBC

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Special to The Herald-Examiner

A favorite ploy of science-fiction writers is to invent some sort of peril that will wipe out life on earth. Horrors multiply, readers squirm and book sales soar.

In real life our scientists do much the same thing, although the horrors are seldom as immediate. In real life they merely accumulate, and are less apparent in the beginning.

We've gone through enough of that with the nuclear bomb and chemical warfare poisons and defoliants and DDT. We ought to be used to it.

It is probably for that reason we are not reading any scare headlines about the chemical PBC. It isn't that people don't care. It's merely that there's not much shock-value left in a toxic chemical that merely destroys some life forms.

PBCs are polychlorinated biphenyls, which are colorless, odorless, syrupy and are manufactured in the United States under the trade name Aroclor by the Monsato Co.

There were many industrial uses, at first, as softeners in plastics, paint and rubber and as additives in papers and printing inks. PBC also can withstand temperatures of 1,600 degrees and is invaluable in electrical transformers and heat exchangers.

A more insidious property of the chemical is that it can be detected only by the most delicate analysis, and so its widespread presence in the environment went undiscovered for years.

But in 1970 its prevalence and toxicity were nailed down. PBC closely resembles DDT chemically and it was thought for a long time that DDT was the culprit in its deteriorating effects.

In September of 1970 Monsato agreed to withdraw the chemical from all uses except in transformers, where no substitute could be found. Investigators had disclosed that PBC was possibly responsible for outbreaks of liver and skin ailments in Japan and contaminations of fish and sea birds of several countries.

The following year a session of Nobel laureates in Gotenborg, Sweden, concluded that PBC concentrations "may reach levels sufficient to damage ecosystems irreversibly on a world-wide scale before the damage is recognized."

They stated further: "Their entry into the marine environment should be curtailed to every practical extent."

Now, four years later, we have suddenly found that this warning from Gotenborg was indeed prophetic.

MONS 033179