A white hat for industry

Industry has so often been pictured a black-hatted villain (sometimes rightly, often unfairly) that it's pleasant to take note of a white hat for a change. We take this opportunity to doff our hat to Monsanto and symbolically to all those other members of the chemical industry that have moved to set their environmental house in order before being forced to do so. What we're talking about is Monsanto's voluntary curb of sale of polychlorinated biphenyl compounds (PCB's), both in the U.S. and, more recently, in the U.K., for noncontrollable uses.

A bit of background might be in order. PCB's, discovered late in the last century, have proved useful as plasticizers in adhesives and paints and as components in electrical and hydraulic fluids, where they lend fire resistance. In Britain and North America, Monsanto has been sole producer. Several years ago the company became aware that these compounds are toxic and quite persistent. PCB residues have been found in British fresh-water, fish-eating birds, and in feathers collected as long ago as 1940.

Confronted with initial evidence and gathering data of its own, Monsanto became convinced of the ecological danger and accordingly banned sales for noncontrollable uses (plasticizer) while continuing sale for controllable uses (heat-transfer medium in closed systems). Total sales involved could be on the order of $25 million.

Our basic information, which we have confirmed, comes from an article by Jon Tinker in the April 1 issue of *New Scientist and Science*. He notes: "Such action, taken without any overt government pressure, is almost certainly unique. In one sense, Monsanto's move may be seen as a desperate throw to retain at least part of a lucrative market which might otherwise be entirely lost. Indeed, the company makes no effort to deny that it believes the partial PCB ban to be in its own long-term interests. But this cannot be allowed to obscure the unprecedented nature of [acceptance of charges before guilt has been scientifically proved]."

We think Tinker puts it very nicely. According to Tinker, Monsanto admits that altruism is not the sole basis for its decision, that other reasons also came into play. Thus, better voluntary action now than force later on; a partial ban on noncontrollable uses may preserve the market for controllable applications; for Monsanto, which wants to sell pollution control technology, better to have clean skirts; and finally, Monsanto, sole producer in the two largest PCB markets, needn't worry overmuch about loss of sales to competitors.

Like Tinker, though, we see no reason to downgrade Monsanto's overall motives. All in all, we'd say that the company has acted in an altogether enlightened way, nicely balancing questions of public and private (its own) good. And we think other firms would do well to study this case history. Too often, when accused of environmental wrongdoing, industry has dug its heels in, stubbornly denying any sin and then only belatedly to make amends. From either altruistic or cynical standpoint, it would seem better to take the high road, admit to any problems, and make corrections. Will other PCB makers—Bayer in Germany, Prodelec in France, Flix in Spain, others elsewhere—follow suit?

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BACKGROUND

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