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PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT AGAINST THE DISPERSAL OF TOXIC PCB COMPOUNDS

Under the European Communities Programme for Action on the environment, the Commission has just forwarded to the Council a proposal for a directive which should make possible the collection in the Community of a group of particularly noxious toxic compounds (PCBs) for the purposes of regenerating and/or destroying them.

The danger of PCBs

The PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are a group of synthetic substances which are put to many uses. At the present time, they are used particularly as liquid coolants, dielectric liquids in condensers and transformers and hydraulic liquids by reason of their excellent electrical insulating properties, non-inflammability and stability. The accidental distribution of PCBs throughout the environment has been widespread since 1930, the time when they first appeared on the market. Since that time, more than half a million tonnes have been produced in the world. The Community's annual PCB consumption is estimated at 15,000 tonnes. Today, even though production may have been slowed down, the increase in pollution due to these compounds remains disquieting; they are even found, for example, in ice at the North Pole.

In view of their non-biodegradability and their tendency to accumulate in living organisms, PCBs are very insidious, particularly where chronic toxicity is concerned. A number of accidents have been reported in recent years, including the disease known as Yusho's disease (1968) in Japan, where about a thousand subjects became contaminated.

Regulations on wastes

At present, no Member State in the Community has in force any specific set of regulations on PCBs. The Commission's proposal comes within the implementation of the Community's Programme for Action on the Environment, which provides that action be initiated in the field of industrial wastes and consumer residues. For its part, the French Government, has just notified the Commission of a draft Order on the conditions of use of PCBs.

This draft directive is a first step in solving at Community level problems connected with toxic wastes. Within the next few weeks, the Commission will present a report on such wastes. This report may possibly be followed by a proposal for a directive. In particular, a list of these wastes might be drawn up.

Initiatives in the field of toxic wastes form part of a whole series of actions undertaken on the subject of toxic wastes. A proposal for an outline directive on this matter was sent to the Council on 17 September 1974 and the work is proceeding, the Commission believes, along fruitful lines. This outline

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directive might be supplemented by specific measures for certain classes of wastes. Apart from t xic wastes, it should be noted that, on the 7 November, the Council adopted a directive on used oils. On 8 January, the Commission forwarded to the Council a programme on the management and storage of radioactive wastes.

Measures proposed

Dispersive use (e.g., as plastifiers, as lubrication and cutting oils, or mixed with pesticides) will no longer be permitted after the Council has adopted the proposal for a directive which was forwarded to it by the Commission six months ago, concerning restrictions on the marketing and use of certain dangerous substances and preparations.

The steps proposed by the Commission are designed to prohibit all discharging or dumping of these compounds. To this end, Member States are required to set up or appoint bodies which will have special responsibility for the collection, regeneration and/or destruction of PCBs. Every three years, each of the Member States will compile a report on the state of PCB treatment in its territory.

The necessary measures for implementing the directive will be applied within a period of 24 months from the time of its notification.