State EPA chief opposes laws to control the use of PCBs

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) - Illinois' top environmental official says he does not favor passing a law to control use of PCBs, chemicals which some experts claim are threatening wildlife and human health.

"These (claims) are very scary to me...but on the other hand some drastic actions can become counter-productive," Richard H. Briceland, director of the state Environmental Protection Agency, said Tuesday.

Briceland said a ban on PCBs could force use of substitute chemicals that are even worse.

"The health related data (on the effects of PCBs) is very questionable, the impact is very questionable," he said.

Briceland's comments came in testimony before the House Committee on Environment, Energy and Natural Resources, which is considering legislation to curtail severely the amount of PCBs in commercial products.

PCBs became a focus of world concern in 1968 when more than 1,200 Japanese suffered adverse effects after eating rice oil contaminated by the chemicals. Officials say the Illinois portion of Lake Michigan is heavily contaminated with PCBs.

But Briceland told the committee that it already is illegal to discharge PCBs into Illinois waterways and that control of the chemicals "probably could be handled through the existing system (of state regulation)."

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are liquid compounds that for the past four decades have been used in such products as paints, inks, electric transformers, fluorescent lights, air-conditioners and other electrical equipment.

Karl E. Bremer, a regional official of the U.S. EPA, told the committee that medical records show cases of skin lesions and irritation among workers involved in manufacturing PCBs.

In the Japanese incident skin pigmentation problems, lesions, eye discharges, miscarriages and stillbirths resulted, said Bremer.

He said that in the United States, PCBs have been manufactured by a single producer, the Monsanto Chemical Co. The firm now limits PCB sales to use in closed electrical systems and plans to phase out its sales depending on the availability of alternative fluids, he said.

But Bremer said there have been reports of PCBs being imported for other uses, and they continued to be found in fish from the Mississippi to the Hudson rivers. The PCBs end up in the water due to improper disposal, industrial discharges and vaporization, he said.

"...PCB concentrations in Lake Michigan coho salmon, lake trout, and chubs exceed the (U.S.) Food and Drug Administration's temporary tolerance level of five parts per million," said Bremer. "These concentrations have not decreased since 1972."

James D. Griffith, representing a coalition called PCB Gone, told the committee that "Lake Michigan, the many small lakes of Illinois, every fisherman and every person who has fish as a part of his diet is threatened by PCBs."

Griffith said Indiana and Michigan already have enacted legislation controlling PCBs, and such laws are pending in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

"It is, ladies and gentlemen, an emergency," said Griffith. "Illinois is a little behind these other states, and I hope (the law) will be enacted this session."

But Briceland said state officials have never been given a satisfactory explanation of why the FDA set its tolerance level for PCBs at five parts per million in fish. The FDA acted "very arbitrarily," he said.

Briceland said the state EPA has found only one firm making a significant contribution to the PCB contamination of Lake Michigan—Outboard Marine Corp. of Waukegan. Negotiations are under way to solve that problem, he said.

Another EPA official told the committee that PCB concentrations above five parts per million "are prominent in Lake Michigan only. Downstate fish samples have shown levels in flesh far below (that)."

One of the bills being considered by the committee is a draft committee bill, the other is sponsored by Rep. Michael L. Getty, D-Dolton.

The bills would bar or limit manufacture of PCBs and call for phased-in restrictions on their presence in commercial products.

Rep. Daniel M. Pierce, D-Highland Park, the committee chairman, appointed a subcommittee to study the issue further.

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