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Persistent, prevalent PCBs

By Martha Angle and Robert Walters

WASHINGTON (NEA) - With apologies to composer Woody Guthrie, here's a new line for one of the country's best-known folk songs: "From the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters, this land is soaked with PCB."

PCBs are polychlorinated biphenyls, a family of toxic, highly persistent industrial chemicals that have caused liver damage and birth defects in laboratory animals.

The redwood forests span the southern coast of Oregon, where a commercial bakery recently discovered that it had purchased — and now must destroy — 50,000 PCB-contaminated eggs.

The Gulf Stream waters wash the east coast of Florida, where a chemist recently found a marked decline in the potential fertility of young men that appeared to be related in part to PCB traces found in the subjects' sperm.

This month's reports of PCB contamination aren't limited to those two states. In Pocatello, Idaho, a poultry company is in the process of destroying more than 240,000 contaminated chickens and more than 1 million poisoned eggs.

In Clinton, Iowa, a packing company is destroying the meat from 30,000 sows slaughtered this summer and fall at the firm. In Richmond, Utah, PCB traces have been found in 75,000 frozen cakes that also must be destroyed.

In Billings, Mont., federal health officials have converged on a hog processing firm where meat meal byproduct is suspected of being the source of the most recent outbreak of widespread PCB contamination.

The government investigation already encompasses most of the country's northern tier of states, because the Montana company sells 150,000 to 200,000 pounds of animal feed weekly throughout Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

The Billings [illegible] of the mid-September animal meal [illegible] Environmental Protection Agency, but researchers in Michigan [illegible] than 10 percent of a group of home college students involved in the study suffered from functional sterility.

Other scientists reported at the American Chemical Society convention that tons of PCBs fall from the air each year into the Great Lakes.

[illegible] produces confirmed, discharged or banned by federal, [illegible] traces of PCB contamination discovered in the country [illegible] include the Hudson — more than 400,000 eggs in Virginia and North Carolina, 250,000 pounds of turkey roll in [illegible] Carolina, 30,000 turkeys in Minnesota and 200,000 chickens in Maine, New York and North Carolina.

Chesapeake Bay, New York's Hudson River, Alabama's estuaries and Lake Michigan were found to have such high levels of PCBs that fishing in those waters was banned. Milk contamination has been reported in West Virginia and Ohio.

Meanwhile, the company that was the sole U.S. producer and marketer of PCBs for almost half a century is busily [illegible] the public about the real and imagined glories of [illegible] chemicals.

The Monsanto Co. of St. Louis finally halted its production [illegible] Gulf under the Arsenic trade name) in the summer of [illegible] — but not until it had produced enough of the toxic liquid to [illegible] an entire navy.

Monsanto has claimed in recent years that it always was concerned about the dangers posed by PCBs and "has made every effort" to keep the public informed about the hazards.

But when the threat of PCBs was first disclosed in the early 1970s, Monsanto complained about revelations as mere "political changes and distorted headlines ... scare tactics and sensational reporting."

The company now has mounted an ambitious and expensive advertising campaign designed to demonstrate that chemicals are valuable, if not indispensable, to modern life.

Monsanto's ubiquitous television commercials extol the virtues of chemicals ranging from preservatives to firefighting compounds. Never mentioned, however, is the product that will launch the nation for many decades to come — PCBs. [illegible]

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