Level of toxic PCBs in Americans declines sharply

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency, emerging from months of criticism of its failures, reported a unusual story Monday: a sharp drop in the levels of a toxic chemical in the bodies of all Americans.

The fraction of Americans with high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, also known as PCBs, declined from 0.7 percent in 1977 to 1 percent in 1981, according to a new EPA study.

Agency officials hailed the drop as evidence that their campaign to get the once widely used chemical compound out of the environment was working.

"This is a dramatic example of the improvements that environmental regulations are bringing us," said Don Clay, EPA acting assistant administrator for pesticides and toxic chemicals.

THE FIRST OVER PCBs was one of the major chemical battles of the 1970s. In 1976, Congress imposed a ban on the manufacture of the compound — used as an insulator in electrical equipment — after becoming alarmed at laboratory tests linking PCBs to a variety of illnesses and evidence of rising levels of PCBs in fish in the Great Lakes and the Hudson River.

Scientists had expressed concern because the chemical does not break down easily in the environment and accumulates in the fat tissue of humans as well as fish.

From 1972 to 1977, the percentage of Americans with high levels of PCBs — more than 3 parts per million — rose from 4 percent to 0.7 percent.

But since then, the level has declined, dropping to 0.1 percent in 1978, 0.5 percent in 1979 and 1 percent in the latest study.

DR. FREDERICK KUTZ, chief of EPA's field studies branch, said the declines were particularly encouraging in light of the increases in the first years of monitoring.

"We saw an upward increase in PCBs, and that alarmed us very much. Finally, we are seeing evidence of a decline," he said.

However, the study found that all Americans now carry detectable levels of PCBs in their fat tissue. In 1972, the agency estimated that 35 percent of Americans had detectable levels of PCBs in their bodies. Tests have linked PCBs to reproductive failures, genetic disorders, skin lesions, tumors and other problems in laboratory animals.

While there is no evidence of human health effects from low levels of PCBs, Clay said, "No one says it is good for you."

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