ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
D. 326,376 SUN. 541,888

DEC 13 1975

editorials

Threat Of PCBs

Despite mounting evidence of their serious threat to the environment and to human health, the pollutants known as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenals) are proving to be as difficult to get rid of as the menacing pesticide, DDT, which was not finally banned for most uses until 1972 — 10 years after the late Rachel Carson alerted the public to its hazards. Because of their fire resistance and electrical insulating properties, PCBs are used in die castings, fireproof sealants and various coatings. But useful as PCBs are, their hazardous nature is now considered so great that an eventual total ban is being sought.

After warning that significant PCB residues have been found in the Great Lakes and in every major river system of the United States and that, unless checked, their intake through fish used as food "can place the human population in mortal danger," Assistant Interior Secretary Nathaniel Reed called the other day for a national ban on all domestic and imported PCBs destined for use other than in transformers and capacitors; even for these two closed cycle uses, Mr. Reed said there must be immediate and intensive evaluation of replacement products. The Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council have petitioned the Food and Drug Administration to lower immediately the permissible levels of PCBs in food and eventually to ban all foods containing PCBs at any level.

The reason for the alarm is that PCBs are already known to have caused cancer in laboratory animals and to have caused other severe ailments in humans. Their use in Japan was curbed after 1000 people in 1968 suffered serious effects from accidental exposure. Because of ubiquitous PCB contamination, multimillion-dollar fisheries in the Great Lakes and elsewhere are in jeopardy; and some fish and bird species may become extinct.

As a result of careless disposal methods, an estimated 10,000,000 pounds of PCBs escape into the environment each year. Although the risk from PCBs has been known for years, the Environmental Protection Agency has been slow to move — mainly because it doubts that it has authority under the Water Pollution Control Act of 1972. An effective toxic substances control law, which the EPA says it needs, has been stalled in Congress since 1971, largely as a result of the opposition of industrial lobbyists. The St. Louis-based Monsanto Co., the only U.S. maker of PCBs — which sells them only for use in transformers and capacitors — says it is working on substitute products. Other companies say they have substitutes.

Elimination of the PCB menace, however, is likely to come only as a result of firm actions by the Government to reduce the permissible levels of PCBs in food, to impose controls on disposal and to require a phaseout of their use as soon as possible.

MONS 033182