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Industrial pollutants seen as serious threat

NEW YORK, Oct. 16 (AP-DJ) -- A group of industrial pollutants that seemed to be coming under control a few years ago is currently emerging as a more serious threat than the insecticide DDT.

The ubiquitous pollutants -- a chemical family derived from benzene and called polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs -- are stirring concern for a variety of reasons. They have caused severe human ailments, including a skin disease and liver problems, and researchers are finding evidence that PCBs are toxic at far lower levels than previously resulted in high incidence of miscarriages and sickly infants, while rats have developed liver cancer. Evidence is accumulating that PCBs may harm some wildlife -- particularly ocean - feeding birds -- and even the entire ecological food chain.

Furthermore, PCBs are far more resistant than even DDT to degradation by natural forces. In many places the accumulation of PCBs in the environment either has exceeded or may soon exceed that of DDT.

But because of their advantages -- chemical stability, fire resistance and electrical insulating properties -- PCBs are important to the safe operation of many electrical transformers and capacitors. They also have been used in such varied products as lubricants, waterproofing chemicals and "carbonless" duplicating paper.

Evidence of contamination now is being discovered far from industrial plants. "It's all over the place -- we find PCBs everywhere we look," says Glenn E. Schweitzer, director of the Office of Toxic Substances of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Worrisome quantities of PCBs have been detected in fish ranging from salmon in Lake Michigan to striped bass in the Hudson River -- a hint that the chemicals are leaking into the very beginnings of the food chain. Oceanographers have found the chemicals far at sea.

That concern is increased by the fact that a three - year - old voluntary restriction on PCB applications in the U.S. has failed to reduce pollution. "The contamination of the environment is as bad as it has ever been," says Donald I. Mount, an aquatic toxicologist and director of the National Water Quality Laboratory in Duluth.

The controls were instituted in the wake of a 1972 report by a federal government task force that urged that PCBs "should be restricted to essential or non - replaceable uses which involve minimum direct human exposure, since they can have adverse effects on human health." The sole U.S. producer, Monsanto Co., voluntarily stopped selling the chemicals to "several thousand" customers -- all except users with "closed system" electrical applications.

The St. Louis - based company says that it now sells to only 40 PCB customers in the U.S. and that its U.S. production has been slashed to about 40 million pounds a year from the 1970 peak of 85 million pounds. Monsanto also makes PCBs in Europe and sells them under the same restrictions.

But the production cutback has failed to reduce pollution levels for several reasons. One is the chemicals' persistence in the environment; PCBs "could be around for years and years to come," says Nicholas S. Fisher, a marine ecologist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts. Also, many U.S. users of PCBs cut off by Monsanto are obtaining supplies from European producers for use in hand soaps, copying - ink toners and other products that readily contribute to pollution, federal officials believe.

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