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Modern technology's 'chickens'

"If the government ever reported all the strange things that are in beef and pork and chicken and everything else, we'd be so frightened that we'd probably starve to death," said a New York fish company owner on being told that unhealthy levels of yet another toxic chemical (PCBs) had been detected in bass caught in the Hudson River.

We doubt that. Americans generally have become used to hearing about all the strange things being found in their food. The discovery of the potentially harmful effects of DDT some years ago set off a national scare, but concern about toxic chemicals has subsided somewhat since then. That's a pity, because Americans have every reason to continue being concerned as more and more of modern technology's chemical "chickens" come home to roost.

Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs for short, constitute one of the most potentially harmful group of chemicals used by industry. They are used in adhesives, paints, varnishes, printing ink, plastics, transformers, capacitors and other electrical equipment, and even in some hand soaps. They are known to have caused reproductive failure and birth defects in animals, and are suspected of causing cancer in laboratory rats.

Although it has yet to be proved, PCBs may have caused cancer and birth defects in some humans in Japan. The federal government has set a safety level — five parts per million. Fish contaminated above that level are unfit to eat, says the government, and should not be shipped in interstate commerce.

In recent months unsafe levels of PCBs have been found in fish taken from Lake Superior and the Mississippi River. Last week, high levels of PCBs were detected in transformer oil which had been dumped close to the Mississippi River near Winona. Winona and state officials are now checking to determine if the city's water table has been contaminated.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency has recommended a ban on the sale and use of PCBs; it has been joined by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and Michigan's anti-pollution agency. Congress has taken no action on the recommendation. The use of PCBs, which are manufactured now in the United States by only one company, Monsanto Chemical Co., has been subject to voluntary restrictions for several years, but, scientists report, there are no signs that PCB pollution is abating. We hope Minnesota's senators and congressmen, who have been sent a copy of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's recommendation, will put it into legislation when they return to Congress after their August vacation. Because PCBs are so widely used, only a national ban can be effective.

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