

Showdown on Toxins

"We are literally surrounded by a man-made chemical environment. We continually wear, wash with, inhale, and ingest a multitude of chemical substances."—From the report by the Senate Commerce Committee on the Toxic Substances Control Bill.

Chemistry has done much to improve modern life but, as the above-quoted committee observed earlier this year, certain chemicals pose "lethal dangers" to human health. The polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) afford a recent dramatic example of chemical risk.

These synthetic substances, widely used for insulation in electrical transformers and generators as well as in carbonless copy paper and many other industrial products, are highly toxic. Medical research has linked PCB's with tumors, skin lesions, and genetic disorders, but health authorities have lacked the clear-cut legal authority to regulate and restrict their use.

Like the pesticide DDT which has now been banned, PCB's are not biodegradable. They persist in the food chain and accumulate in human tissues. Dumped in a river, they are ingested by fish, consumed by humans and, in a recent authenticated case, were found to have been transmitted to a newborn baby through the mother's milk.

In approving the toxic substances bill this week, the House of Representatives added an amendment that imposes a ban on PCB's within two years. The bill itself establishes important new procedures enabling the Environmental Protection Agency to regulate potentially dangerous chemicals. Three months before marketing a new chemical or proposing a "significant new use" for an existing substance, a chemical manufacturer would be required to notify the agency and, if necessary, submit the chemical to tests for safety. Pre-market screening is the heart of the law. Chemicals should be fully tested and the risks impartially evaluated before—not after—they have entered the marketplace.

The bill passed by the House is a somewhat different version of a measure approved by the Senate in March. This is the third consecutive Congress in which both houses have approved different versions of a toxic substances control bill. Four years ago, the bills died in the rush to adjournment. Two years ago, a protracted conference failed to reach agreement because a weak House bill failed to provide the pre-market screening safeguards that the Senate deemed essential, and the House conferees refused to yield.

This year, the Senate bill is again stronger but the area to be compromised is much narrower. If the House conferees under the leadership of Representative John Murphy, New York Democrat, meet the Senate at least part way, agreement is readily attainable.

It is imperative that Congress agree upon an effective toxic substances control law this year. Unless man brings under better control the chemical environment that his ingenuity has created, everybody's health is endangered and large numbers may face serious physical harm, suffering and even death.