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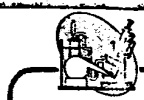
PCB—Another Killer



By RICHARD POTHIER
Times-Miami Herald Services

MIAMI — A poisonous new man-made chemical, nearly as deadly and long lasting as DDT, is slowly diffusing through the entire environment of Florida and the rest of the nation — creating fear of another "DDT crisis."

The new pollutant has recently started turning up in fish, birds, water, and even man. And it's quickly becoming almost as prevalent in some birds and animals as DDT itself.

SCIENTISTS BELIEVE the new chemical is virtually a "classical case study" of how a harmful pollutant can spread through the ecological system before it's even identified.

This new environmental threat carries a deceptively simple name.

Scientists call it "PCB," short for "polychlorinated biphenyl." PCB doesn't occur naturally — it's made from benzene, a petroleum derivative.

And PCB is used extensively in manufacturing, although it's made by just one company — Monsanto Chemical.

LIKE DDT, PCB is "persistent," which means it doesn't break down quickly in nature — thus, in the bodies of fish, birds, animal life and even man. Scientists are still looking for data on possible long-term effects of PCB on all forms of life on earth.

PCB is used in the manufacture of products ranging from pesticides to ink to plastics to electrical insulation. It's even found in some of the plastics bags wrapping supermarket food.

As these products decompose, the PCB remains intact — to be picked up later in the "food chain" and work its way up the chain of fish, eagles, and man himself.

"WE'VE TURNED up some pretty sizable levels here in Florida," says Jack Lowe, a fish research biologist at the U.S. Bureau of Commercial Fisheries lab in Gulf Breeze, near Pensacola.

"There is evidence now that this compound is toxic to fish and animals," Lowe said.

And other federal biologists said pesticides such as PCB is being found in dead birds, particularly bald eagles, in about the same amount as DDT — which has up to now been blamed for many bird deaths.

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