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Chemicals Once 'Well in Hand'

Contamination Reportedly Goes On

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WASHINGTON — Poisonous industrial chemicals called PCBs are widely contaminating the environment — including some drinking water — three years after the government thought it had them "well in hand," a worried Environmental Protection Agency revealed Friday.

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) at certain levels can cause serious toxic effects in humans. They threaten the food chain and, according to a recent unpublished report cited by the EPA, malignant liver tumors developed in rats exposed to one part per 100 billion of a particular PCB.

High PCB levels recently reported in fish in the Great Lakes area, the Hudson River Valley, and elsewhere "underscore the urgency of the problem," Dr. John L. Buckley, an EPA consultant and former official, told the Senate Commerce subcommittee on the Environment. PCBs impair the ability of fish to reproduce.

Contamination "is more widespread" and "some concentrations are higher than previously believed," Buckley told subcommittee Chairman John V. Tunney, D-Calif.

These concentrations "greatly exceed" Food and Drug Administration guidelines, thus "threatening our ecological resources" and "impacting directly on the jobs of local fishermen and on available food supplies," Buckley testified.

"At the same time continuing PCB discharges are adding further to the total environmental burden of the chemical, which degrades very slowly indeed," he said.

EPA enforcement official Stanley W. Legro said the agency has several reports of PCBs in tap water. In a letter to Tunney released at the hearing, Legro identified communities with this problem as Bridgeport, Conn.; New Bedford, Mass.; Escondido, Calif.; Sellersburg, Ind., and Winnebago, Ill.

The PCB problem "will not be adequately resolved" unless Congress empowers the EPA to regulate manufacture and importation of substances such as PCBs by passing the proposed Toxic Substances Control Act, said Buckley, who endorsed the bill in behalf of the agency.

The Senate and House passed the bill in 1973, but deadlocked in conference when the House refused to accept a Senate provision for premarket testing of chemicals for safety. This year, the Senate Commerce Committee completed hearings on the bill but ran into fierce industry opposition to the same provision.

Introduced about 1930, PCBs have been used mainly as cooling fluids in electrical transformers and other equipment, as fluids for electromagnets, as heat-transfer fluids, as hydraulic oil, and as plasticizers for waxes and adhesives.