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ENVIRONMENT

CONTROL OF CERTAIN TOXIC CHEMICALS

The member countries of the OEEC have jointly decided to control the production and sale of chemical products known under the name of polychlorinated diphenyl (PCB)the use of which is likely to contaminate the environment. This represents the first international accord aiming at limiting the manufacture and use of chemical products for reasons of environmental protection.

Certain limited uses have been listed in the decision by the Committee concerning notably cases where the non-flammability of the PCB is an essential element. The decision by the OEEC Committee also provides for PCB production for use in closed systems, such as condensers, and transformers which are components of large electrical complexes; these presenting minimum riskr for the environment.

Under the agreement, the member countries will give priority to the elimination of PCB usage in products such as heat-tranfer fluids in the food industry; pharmaceuticals and feed products; adhesives and glues; hydraulic fluids (except in mining) and lubricants; fluids for vacuum pumps; pesticides.

The action taken by the OEEC reflects a general preoccupation by the various governments following a series of accidents. The persistency and toxicity of the PCBs was first discovered in 1966, when traces of these products were found in wild fish and birds. Other accidents reported during the past four years included: contamination of fryers by PCB contained in the plastic packaging material; the discovery of PCB in food packaging due to the use of reproduction paper in the manufacture of paper pulp; the presence of PCB in cow milk based on the fact that the animals had absorbed feed polluted through the PCB originating either from pesticides or used in silos (U.S. in 1969, 1970 and 1971). The most serious accident concerned the poisoning of humans due to a leak of heat-transfer fluid in a rice-oil pasteurization plant which happened during 1968 in Japan.

The agreement is based on suggestions for a concerted action as decided during the November 1972 meeting of the Sectorial Committee for the Environment. It foresees increased coordination among the member countries in order to reduce distortions in international trade which may result from a lack of harmonisation in the measures taken on the national level.

The decision of the Committee, which led to a coordinated regulating measure regarding environmental matters in the countries of the OEEC, emphasizes that the ultimate goal is the total elimination of PCB dispersal. The agreement is in accord with a resolution by the U.N. Conference on Human Environment which took place in June 1972, inviting the governments to reduce to a minimum the dispersal of substances dangerous or toxic, especially when they are persistant.

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