These first tentative steps involve the international monitoring of a new science. In contrast, global attempts to regulate the use of PCBs involve a family of ubiquitous industrial chemicals that have been in use since the 1930s. They are good electrical insulators, and resist fire and corrosion.

They also make people sick. In 1968 a batch of rice oil in Japan became contaminated with PCBs. Treatment was given to 1,291 patients for stomach pain, headache, fatigue and other ailments. The incident prompted the Japanese government in 1971 to announce a ban on PCB production and tight controls on imports. In the U.S., the Food and Drug Administration started finding evidence that PCBs were leaking into the environment, contaminating eggs, milk and fish. As early as 1970, Monsanto Co., the only U.S. maker of PCBs, voluntarily agreed to limit sales to certain electrical uses where environmental escape was unlikely.

But Japan had set the example. The staff of Democratic Sen. Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin wrote Tokyo for a copy of the anti-PCB law in preparation for a congressional ban on the substances here. It was adopted this year as an amendment to a bill giving the government more control over toxic substances. After the bill passed, Monsanto announced it will withdraw entirely from the PCB business by October of next year, not only in the U.S. but in Britain as well.

A Cautious Response

The Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has published a report by a special council it has set up to consider the danger. Said the report, cautiously: "The use of PCBs should be controlled by international action in order to minimize their escape into the environment pending the realization of the ultimate objective of eliminating entirely their escape into the environment." The council recommended against use of PCBs in pesticides, or as heat transfer fluids in the food and drug industries.

U.S. environmental regulators hope more countries will go further and unilaterally ban PCBs altogether. The new U.S. toxic substances law includes a prohibition after two and a half years on all imported products containing PCBs, which regulators here think will be a powerful influence on foreign manufacturers selling in the big American market. "As a result of the U.S. ban, every other country will consider the possibility of banning PCBs themselves," predicts an EPA official.

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