Monsanto to quit PCB business next year

Monsanto has made it definite. It will shut down its polychlorinated biphenyls unit, complete distribution of all inventories, and withdraw completely from the market by no later than Oct. 31, 1977.

Monsanto, the only U.S. supplier of PCB dielectric insulating fluids to the electrical power supply industry, had said last January that it would cease production voluntarily as soon as the electrical industry could find viable alternate fluids and convert its equipment and components to their use. In announcing the firm withdrawal date, Earle H. Harbison Jr., general manager of Monsanto's specialty chemicals division, said last week that the company would have targeted an even earlier shutdown date had transformer and capacitor manufacturers' conversion timetables permitted.

PCB's have been of concern since the early 1970's, when they were found to persist and accumulate in the environment. PCB's, even at low part-per-million levels, were found to cause adverse effects in fish and aquatic life. And laboratory tests have shown them to cause reproductive failures, gastric disorders, skin lesions, and tumors in mammals. For these reasons, the Environmental Protection Agency has considered PCB's to be a significant hazard to human health as well as the environment.

Train: already in environment



Commending Monsanto's decision as "a significant step in dealing with the total problem of PCB contamination, EPA administrator Russell E. Train notes, however, that the problem will continue. Millions of pounds of PCB's, he points out, are already in the environment.

PCB's have been in use for well over 40 years. When their environmental persistence first became evident in the early 1970's, Monsanto began a voluntary program of ending sales for all nonelectrical applications. PCB's had been used, for example, in carbonless copy paper, fire-resistant hydraulic fluids, heat transfer fluids, and plasticizers. Electrical equipment was a knottier problem. Harbison notes, for instance, that PCB's, because of their fire resistance, were in many cases the only fluids approved for dielectric applications.

This July, electrical equipment manufacturer Westinghouse set a definite timetable for phasing out the use of PCB's (C&EN, July 26, page 7). It would, the company said, cease using PCB's as fire-resistant transformer insulating fluids at the end of this year. And it would make no quotations for new PCB-filled units for shipment occurring after Dec. 31. Oil and silicone fluid are, at present, the alternatives available. □

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