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PCBs Threat to Environment Only Recognized 10 Years Ago

Polychlorinated biphenyls, more commonly known as PCBs, have been used by industry for more than 40 years in the manufacture of electrical capacitors and transformers, paints, electrical wire and carbonless paper, but their threat to the environment was only recognized 10 years ago.

Because PCBs do not break down easily, increased amounts have been appearing in the environment. High concentrations have been found in fish and wildlife and scientists believe it may be more dangerous than DDT.

The PCBs threat was first recognized in 1966 when fish from various Swedish waters were found to contain the chemical. Since then, PCBs have been identified as contaminants in food supplies around the world.

PCBs have been found in all fish tested from the Great Lakes, as well as in fish in the Ohio River, Hudson River and waters in Alabama, Georgia and Indiana.

Worldwide attention was focused on the toxic effects of PCBs by the 1968 poisoning of some 1,057 Japanese who ate rice contaminated with the compound.

PCBs were discovered in mother's milk in tests conducted in 10 states by the U S Environmental Protection Agency and laboratory tests indicate PCBs may cause changes in skin pigmentation, acne-like skin eruptions, reproductive problems, abortions and cancer.

Industrial cancer deaths linked to PCBs exposure were recently revealed by the Mobil Oil Corp., where seven workers who worked with PCBs in the 1950s developed cancer.

Cancers were also reported among employes of General Electric and the Monsanto Co., the sole U.S. producers of the chemical.

The EPA began cracking down on PCBs usage last July and was instrumental in getting President Ford to sign a bill to ban the production of the compound.

Three states, Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin, have also passed laws restricting the sale, use and manufacture of PCBs.

It has been estimated that about 3,000 pounds of PCBs are discharged annually by industries. The Hudson River in New York is believed to contain about 500,000 pounds of the chemical, which binds itself to particulate matter suspended in the water as well as to the sediment on the bottom.

Evidence indicates PCBs are as persistent as DDT and tend to accumulate in the body tissues.