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THE REGISTER'S EDITORIALS



Careless with PCB

Iowa officials are now faced with the task of disposing of 17,000 gallons of waste oil contaminated with PCB, a toxic chemical. The oil is in two leaky storage tanks and a transport truck in Fort Dodge. It was intended to be spread on gravel roads until the Iowa Department of Environmental Quality learned of the PCB from Minnesota officials, who found it in oil stored in that state which had come from the same source as that in Fort Dodge.

This incident and others elsewhere point up a serious shortcoming in congressional efforts to curb the use of cancer-causing PCB.

Last fall Congress passed a "toxic substances control bill" to halt the manufacture, sale or distribution of PCB not in "enclosed systems," unless the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found that it could be safely handled. (Monsanto Industrial Chemicals, the sole manufacturer, plans to stop making PCB this year.) The bill became effective Jan. 1 but its restrictions on disposal of existing PCB have not yet gone into effect, although PCB is present in quantity through its use as an insulating fluid in electrical transformers.

PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) is a colorless, odorless liquid that can cause cancer or birth defects if swallowed in relatively small amounts. Had the contaminated oil been spread on roads and then washed into streams supplying drinking water, many people could have been killed or seriously harmed.

In Bloomington, Ind., PCB from a Westinghouse electrical power capacitor plant has been identified as a primary source of PCB pollution contaminating water, land, farm produce, sewage facilities and people. Sludge from a sewage plant processing PCB-tainted wastes was spread on farm fields as fertilizer.

The Iowa oil contamination resulted from mixing of PCB and other liquid wastes with waste oil at an oil salvage operation in Minnesota.

The contaminations are signs of careless handling of a deadly substance. Tighter controls are urgently needed for PCB and for other salvaged chemicals that may be casually mixed with other wastes.

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