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Action is needed to pinpoint PCB threat

Editorial

A troublesome confrontation between environmental concerns and economic considerations is brewing in Wisconsin now, and the battle will affect many South Wood County area residents.

The newest problem chemicals are known as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). PCBs have been found in Wisconsin rivers and lakes and other waterways in the United States. When fish ingest PCBs, there is a "bioaccumulative" effect, meaning the concentration of the PCB is much greater in the fish than in the substance eaten by the fish. In humans, PCBs can be extremely harmful.

In Japan about 1,000 people suffered liver disturbances, visual impairment and skin discoloring after an accidental leak of PCBs into rice oil. Since that time, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have set tolerance levels of 5 parts per million for fish and 2.5 parts per million for milk.

The recent attention in Wisconsin to the PCB problem stems from a state report earlier this year that showed PCB levels in fish from Green Bay ranging from 13.1 to 57.5 parts per million.

The PCB problem hits home in Central Wisconsin because a very small percentage of the papers used in recycling operations, such as the one at Paperboard Products Division of Consolidated Papers, Inc., are so-called carbonless papers. Up until 1971 PCBs were used in the manufacture of these carbonless papers.

When these papers are recycled along with other waste papers, the small traces of PCB wind up in the effluent discharged from the Paperboard and other plants using recycled papers.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has indicated it would propose setting limits for PCB discharges so low that paper recycling plants would have to shut down. For the South Wood County area, the effect would be immediate and serious. A Paperboard products executive told a DNR hearing last month that a zero discharge level would mean an end to the recycling operation at Paperboard.

Other Wisconsin paper industry representatives reminded state officials at the DNR hearing that the country and state are committed to development of recycling programs to help conserve natural resources and ease the landfill problem across the country.

Thus, a move to a zero or near-zero discharge for PCBs from wastepaper recycling plants could deal a serious blow to the nation's and state's recycling efforts.

The problem then boils down to just how much, if any, PCB discharge is safe. Based on the DNR hearing evidence, at this point, nobody seems to know the answer to that. The EPA in its testimony at the hearing said it was attempting to gather more information and undertake more testing before it issued proposed federal discharge limits for PCBs early next year.

If the EPA is able to accumulate conclusive evidence that the apparently small discharges of PCBs from paper recycling plants are indeed a threat to human life and fish life, there is no question that very restrictive discharge limits will have to be set. At that time, the paper industry will have to find a way to deal with the problem.

However, the evidence is not conclusive at this time that apparent trace discharges (the discharge levels have not been established) pose a threat of any kind. For one thing, the background level (the level that PCBs are found in the air and water without any known source) has not been determined. As several witnesses noted at the Madison hearings, there is more unknown than known about PCBs.

In view of the evidence thus far, the EPA and DNR should use their tax-supported vast resources to gain more factual information about PCBs. After more conclusive data is obtained, appropriate action should be taken. To act before more is known and close down paper recycling operations throughout Wisconsin does not seem prudent or in the public interest.

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