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EPA

Environmental News

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EPA BANS PCB MANUFACTURE; PHASES OUT USES

The Environmental Protection Agency today issued final regulations banning the manufacture of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and phasing out most PCB uses. PCBs are toxic and persistent chemicals primarily used as insulating fluids in heavy-duty electrical equipment in power plants, industries, and large buildings across the country.

The EPA rules will gradually end many industrial uses of PCBs over the next five years, but will allow their continued use in existing enclosed electrical equipment under carefully controlled conditions.

PCBs, valued for chemical stability and fire resistance, were manufactured and processed primarily for use as insulating fluids and coolants in electrical equipment and machinery from 1929-1977.

"Although PCBs are no longer being produced in this country, we will now bring under control the vast majority of PCBs still in use," said EPA Administrator Douglas M. Costle. "This will help prevent further contamination of our air, water and food supplies from a toxic and very persistent man-made chemical."

PCBs have caused birth defects and cancer in laboratory animals, and they are a suspected cause of cancer and adverse skin and liver effects in humans.

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EPA estimates that 150 million pounds of PCBs are dispersed throughout the environment, including air and water supplies; an additional 290 million pounds are located in landfills in this country.

EPA has controlled the waste disposal of PCBs since February 1978, under separate regulations. PCB waste must be destroyed by incineration or disposed in approved landfills. In addition, PCB containers and PCB products must be labelled.

To date, EPA has taken four enforcement actions for illegal PCB disposal. One case resulted in the convictions of three persons for illegally dumping PCBs along 210 miles of roadway in North Carolina. Two other cases resulted in fines totalling $28,600 against two companies for improper disposal of PCBs. A fourth action is pending against another company for improper PCB storage.

Today's action will prohibit the manufacture, processing, distribution in commerce, and "non-enclosed" (open to the environment) uses of PCBs unless specifically authorized or exempted by EPA. "Totally enclosed" uses (contained, and therefore exposure to PCBs is unlikely) will be allowed to continue for the life of the equipment.

EPA will allow use and servicing of most existing large electrical equipment containing PCBs (representing nearly 578 million pounds of the 750 million pounds of PCBs now in use) under controlled conditions for the life of the equipment. A requirement to immediately replace all of this equipment would be prohibitively expensive.

The manufacture of new PCB electrical equipment (transformers and capacitors) is entirely prohibited.

EPA will stop use of waste oil containing any level of PCBs. for dust control. PCB-contaminated waste oil is now used extensively throughout the country to control dust on roadways, providing a direct source of environmental contamination. Other products to control dust on roadways are available and are cost-effective.

During the next three to five years, EPA will reduce existing PCB uses in electrical equipment in railroad and public transit systems, and phase out or reduce uses in mining machinery, in hydraulic and heat transfer systems, and in paints and pigments.

EPA's action will subject all substances containing over 50 ppm PCBs to regulatory control (with the exception of PCB-contaminated waste oil which is prohibited at any level).

R-64 EPA's PCB waste disposal regulations of February 1978 will now apply to all substances containing 50 ppm PCBs, down from the 500 ppm level regulated until now.

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The economic impact on electric utilities, most affected by the ban, is expected to be between $3.2 million and $17.0 million a year in disposal costs for burning PCB-contaminated mineral oil used in transformers and large capacitors. These costs are significantly less than the $80 million it would have cost utilities under the earlier high-temperature incineration requirement. EPA now will allow mineral-oil burning in boilers owned or easily accessible to the utilities, which will provide nearly the same destruction rate (99.9 percent) as the more expensive high-temperature incineration. All of the expenses incurred by the utilities, including replacement of some PCB transformers, are expected to have a negligible effect on consumers' electric bills.

The total first year cost of this rule is expected to range between $58 million and $105 million. By 1985, the annual costs will drop to about $34 million. Annual costs should continue to diminish after 1985 as the use of PCBs is discontinued.

The ban on the manufacturing, processing, distribution, and use of PCBs, as well as the PCB disposal and marking regulations, were issued under the Toxic Substances Control Act.

The regulations take effect 30 days after publication in the Federal Register.

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