41-57 PLANT ENGINEERING
E.O.W. 85,000

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ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING DIGEST

"Environmental protection must become the most important ingredient in any national health program," contends Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Russell E. Train. Speaking before a packed house in November at the EPA-sponsored conference on environmental contamination of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) in Chicago (PE 11/13/75, p. 17), Train suggested that the nation may not be getting its money's worth seeking cures for cancer and other diseases that, in reality, are created or aggravated by factors in the environment. "There is an increasing body of evidence—and an impressive array of expert opinion—that the role of viruses in cancer, for example, is small. We may be approaching the whole question of human health from the wrong side." He urged that greater emphasis be placed on eliminating pollution, noting that "an ounce of prevention may well be worth a pound of cure."

Train said that his Agency will cope with PCB's as best as it can under existing authority—notably the Water Pollution Control Act. "What is really needed, however, is a law that would allow sensible steps to be taken to prevent such chemicals from posing problems in the first place." He called for quick passage of the long-delayed Toxic Substances Control Act, which would require industry to test chemicals for health and ecological effects before they are marketed and released to the environment. Train reported that some 600 chemical compounds have been introduced annually into the commercial market during the past 5 years. "We have done so without any systematic, advance assessment of their impact upon public health. As we have learned through experience with such materials as vinyl chloride, we may not discover how harmful a compound can be until years after it has become a rather commonplace item in our everyday life."

Since 1972, PCB's have, in general, been limited to use as insulating and heat transfer fluids in closed systems. The chemicals have, however, been showing up in concentrations of up to 350 ppm in fish in many of the nation's waterways. The Food and Drug Administration reports that concentrations exceeding 5 ppm are unfit for human consumption. Japan has banned all production and import of PCB's.

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Complaints to regulatory agencies about odor pollution have approached the total of all other air pollution complaints, charges Oscar B. Lauren, environmental odor consultant, Hinsdale, IL. He warns that odor-causing wastes are increasing at a "tremendous rate." The magnitude of the problem is difficult to assess, says Lauren. "By 1980, our effluents will be sufficient to consume all the oxygen of all the flow in dry weather of the 22 river basins in the U.S." The odor problem can be solved in part by "odor modification," he claims, in which two substances are mixed together to make the odor less intense. Odor modification, however, should never be used to disguise dangerous gases, warns Lauren. "Where economical, odors should be eliminated at the source."

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Extra-high-voltage power lines are being investigated by the EPA to determine if the radiation emitted is harmful. The lines, which carry 765,000 volts, have noise levels of up to 60 decibels. Electric fields produced around the lines reportedly are strong enough to give a person standing underneath them a jolt if he touches a large metal object. Adverse physiological effects have been observed on workers in the Soviet Union from lines operating below this extra-high-voltage level. This has resulted in exposure limits being promulgated by the government, similar to limits established for nuclear radiation in the U.S.

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Andrew W. Breidenbach has been nominated by President Ford to be an assistant administrator of EPA. His area of responsibility will be water and hazardous materials. He replaces James W. Agee who resigned in September.

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