PCBs Still a Threat

By Bill Clede



The threat of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) is growing despite restrictions on the sale of this material by the major U.S. manufacturer, according to Bob Pond of *Striper Unlimited*.

At the Connecticut Sportsmen and Travel Show that winds up today at the *Hartford Civic* Center, Pond is telling the story of his efforts in Maryland to hatch striped bass eggs and transplant the fish into new spawning areas. But getting viable eggs is a problem.

"We're finding increased incidence of PCBs, so much that our eggs just fell apart," Pond explained. "For five years we've been doing this project and success has declined as the PCB increases. We're even finding now in the mud of the river bottom itself."

To keep the program going, Pond plans to take water from the Blackwater River that is protected by a wildlife refuge to hatch the striper eggs rather than from the Nanticoke River where the striper station is located.

In 1969, researchers looking for DDT residues in nature found another chlorinated hydrocarbon that they identified as PCBs. The only North American manufacturer, Monsanto, quickly launched a program to limit use of their product to applications where the material is self-contained. It is used as a coolant in electric transformers.

"But even today, electricians think the oil in those transformers is a harmless vegetable oil," Pond says.

"PCBs were used as early as 1934 and dump operators shot discarded transformers full of hole to drain the oil and reclaim the copper. They didn't know it was dangerous."

Pond says that 40 per cent of all PCBs sold since its introduction is now loose in the environment.

Actually, PCBs were developed in 1929 to answer the need for a non-explosive insulating fluid. So the material had a 40-year history before the environmental hazard was discovered.

A federal task force of representatives from the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Health, Education and Welfare and Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency spent six months studying the problem. It concluded that "PCBs should be restricted to essential or nonreplaceable uses which would minimize the likelihood of human exposure or leakage to the environment."

An on-going study by the Food and Drug Administration shows that PCBs can cause birth defects in laboratory animals. Some effects in chick embryos are similar to those that result from exposure to the herbicide 2-4-5T.

PCBs were first identified as potential food contaminants in 1966. Since then, three sources of food contamination have been identified — general environmental contamination causing residues in fresh water fish, migration of PCB from packaging materials into food and accidental leakage or spillage directly into feed.

But the report of the ask force says, "The dietary intake of PCBs is of low order and does not represent an imminent health hazard. To date, all of the high levels of PCBs encountered in human or naimal foods have been associated with accidents."

Monsanto has long since set up control procedures and educational program.

Manager of environmental control Bill Papageorge says he gets good response to educational efforts by point out the consequences of prohibition. There is no economical alternative to PCBs.

To prevent existing PCBs from getting into the environment, Monsanto recovers PCBs contaminated by arcing in electrical transformers by processing it through clay filters. PCBs that cannot be reclaimed go to an incinerator at the company's Sauget, Ill plant where they are destroyed. But PCBs are persistent. It takes 3,000 degrees to reduce them to carbon dioxide and water.

But PCBs that were discarded before the threat was discovered are *till there* and Pond feels they continue to leech into the natural environment.

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