cc: D. Stohr and PCB Committee

River Reveals High PCB Dose

By Hal Willard
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AN EXPERIMENTAL water quality study being conducted in the Chester River, a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay, shows that a potent industrial chemical called PCB is present in larger quantities than had been anticipated, and that it probably washed in from the bay proper.

Researchers had expected to find some PCB in the Chester, on Maryland's Eastern Shore, but thought it would be washed there from agricultural land by rain. Instead, it appears that it moves into the river borne by the tides.

PCB stands for polychlorinated biphenyl and is a family of man-made chemicals used for 40 years as electrical insulating fluids, heat-transfer fluids, and in ink, paint, lubricants, plastics and carbonless carbon paper.

A report on the study said the PCB level in the Chester was considerably lower than in the lower Virginia portions of the bay and that: "All organisms examined (oysters, soft-shell clams, blue crabs and several species of finfish) so far are well below the FDA limits for body or tissue burdens. However, it has not been established whether or not these low body burdens are detrimental in themselves to valuable species such as the soft-shell clam and oyster."

It is only recently that there has been growing concern that PCB may have a bad effect on humans. The chemical has been found in such foods of man as chickens, turkeys, eggs and fish. The level at which it definitely constitutes a hazard has not yet been determined accurately.

The Food and Drug Administration has proposed controls designed to keep it away from food—banning its use, for example, in food processing plants—but no attempt has been made to keep it out of the environment completely.

Dr. Albert C. Kolbye Jr., deputy director of FDA's Bureau of Foods, told the recent American Chemical Society meeting that PCB still is being found in food despite attempts to keep it out. But, he said, FDA believes the problem is under control.

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PCB gets into humans by working its way up the food chain. It becomes available to the food chain by accident. For example, it is an ingredient of some sealants used on farm silos. It leaks into the ground and is washed by rain into a river. Eventually, it finds its way into fish and shellfish. The next step is mankind.

The study that turned up the PCB information about the Chester River began last November and was designed to serve as a model for detailed multi-disciplined studies of bodies of water to determine pollution levels. It is supported and conducted by the Westinghouse Corporation's Ocean Research Laboratory on the Chesapeake Bay and Maryland's Department of Natural Resources.

The original allocation of funds for the study was enough for only eight months of research. The principals kicked in enough for four more months, taking the study to next Nov. 1 while at the same time seeking a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency with the support of the Maryland congressional delegation, according to Rep. Gilbert Gude (R-Md.).

Scientists feel it is essential to find out where the PCBs being borne into the Chester are coming from so they can be controlled.

The study also has shown thus far that insecticides from surrounding farmland are at low levels, indicating that "applications of these materials on agricultural lands have been within reasonable limits."

However, it was discovered that the standard method for testing shellfish to learn the chlordane content from insecticides in the water is inaccurate. Chlordane is a so-called "hard" insecticide like DDT.

The study report said the FDA has regulatory limits on "how high the levels can rise before they render the shellfish unfit for human consumption" and therefore "research must be directed" to finding a way to measure the chlordane accurately.

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