Oakland, CA
(Alameda County)
Montclarion
(Cir. W. 19,496)

AUG 4 1982

Allen's P. C. B Est. 1888

PCB — a deadly substance may be back in use again

1-407

(EDITOR'S NOTE: When the EPA found traces of PCB in the milk of one-third of all nursing mothers surveyed in a 1975 U.S. study, Congress moved quickly to ban the highly toxic substance. Now, write PNS correspondents Diana Hembree and Susan Ferriss, the agency is quietly moving to deregulate PCB, and some of its own scientists are deeply worried about the consequences. Hembree and Ferriss are associates of the Center for Investigative Reporting, based in Oakland, Calif.)

By Diana Hembree and Susan Ferriss
Pacific News Service

Just seven years after a study by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found traces of the chemical PCB in the milk of an alarming percentage of nursing mothers, the agency is quietly moving to deregulate the highly toxic substance.

In what some scientific experts — including reviewers in the agency itself — regard as a dangerous step, the EPA has proposed to authorize the unlimited use of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in many types of electrical equipment. The agency also is proposing a ten-fold increase in acceptable contamination levels for equipment using PCB, which was technically banned in 1976 following the milk controversy.

Critics say the EPA's proposed rules appear to discount long-standing studies linking PCB to liver disease, jaundice, male sterility, and abdominal illness in humans, as well as cancer and birth defects in laboratory animals.

The regulations are based on two new studies by electrical and chemical industry consultants which conclude that "PCB poses no serious risk of injury to human health."

The studies were submitted to the EPA in February by the Chemical Manufacturers Association (CMA), the Edison Electrical Institute (EEI), and the Utility Solid Waste Management Group (USWMG).

One of the studies concluded that workers exposed to PCB on a regular basis exhibited little more than skin problems. Yet according to a document released during the Carter administration, "Studies of workers exposed to PCBs have shown a number of adverse effects, included but not limited to chloroacne (skin irritation), digestive disturbances, jaundice, impotence, throat and respiratory irritations and severe headaches."

Because of the chemical's potential threat to human health, the policy changes on PCB have generated controversy within EPA's own ranks.

EPA environmental health reviewers charged that the industry studies on the health effects of PCB were selective and biased. In internal documents never officially released to the public, the reviewers characterized a PCB report submitted by the Chemical Manufacturers Association as "unobjectively written" and "not of sufficient scientific interest in most cases to warrant a response."

Dr. Irwin Baumel, who directs the EPA's Health and Environmental Health Review Division, confirmed that his staff reviewers did not accept the conclusions of the second industry report: "We do not agree that the information presented proves that PCBs do not pose any serious risk to human health."

Particularly disturbing to some inside EPA is the agency's new emphasis on weighing risks to public health against the costs of PCB regulation. Though the EPA admitted that phasing out PCB transformers would reduce health risks, for example, it concluded that the dollars needed for a 10-year phase-out would be too high: $2,661 per pound of PCB released into the environment.

Said a California EPA official, who asked to remain anonymous, "The changes in the PCB rules are shocking.... The proposed regulations put a dollar value on human health."

Despite the heavy criticism from its own staff members, the EPA has promoted the industry studies as examples of the latest expert opinion on PCB. EPA director Anne Gorsuch arranged a "national symposium" in mid-May on the health effects of PCB and invited several authors of the industry studies to testify. Scientists from Dow Chemical and Monsanto also were invited.

But Dr. Renate Kimbrough, research medical officer of the national Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, verified that many scientists who had performed independent research on the health effects of PCB were not included in the conference.

Some environmentalists say they suspect that the PEA symposium was arranged as part of an attempt "to railroad" the proposed PCB rules through informal public hearings at the agency on June 7 in Washington, D.C. They point out that the transcript of the PCB symposium was not available until the May 24 deadline for public comment was passed.

PCB, hailed as an inexpensive "miracle chemical" upon its creation in 1929, was widely used as a coolar in industrial electric prc ducts for almost 40 year: But numerous incidents c contamination eventuall made it one of the most con troversial substances in th world.

In 1968, nearly 13,00 Japanese poisoned b PCB-contaminated rice suf fered severe skin disease and vision problems, as wel as liver cancer six times the normal rate.

Two years later, in New York State, tens of thousands of chickens containing high levels of PCE were destroyed on government orders. The Hudson River, contaminated by PCB dumping, was closed to commercial fishing in 1976. And in 1979, a single transformer leak contaminated food and grain distributed to 19 states and two foreign countries, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars in damage.

In 1975, and EPA study of 1,000 nursing women in the United States revealed that almost one-third had PCB in their milk.

In 1976, Congress passed the Toxic Substances Control Act, which banned the manufacture and commercial distribution of PCB.

Ironically, the less stringent PCB rules now under consideration are the direct result of a lawsuit filed against the EPA three years ago by the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF).

The suit sought to overturn a 1976 EPA decision to permit the use of PCB in "totally enclosed" electrical equipment, and not to regulate the use of equipment which contains less than 50 parts per million (ppm) of PCB.

The EDF charged that both decisions violated the intent of the Toxic Substances Control Act.

In 1980, the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the Environmenal Defense Fund and ordered new PCB regulations.

Yet the EPA's proposed PCB rules are more lax than the original regulations, which the court felt were far too weak. The new guidelines, for example, permit the continued use of the chemical in electrical transformers — a major source of PCB pollution.

Though the agency currently regulates the disposal and inspection of all equipment contaminated with more than 50 ppm of PCB, the new laws would boost the regulatory cutoff to 500 ppm.

The new regulations also call for a 10-year phase-out of PCB capacitors — large electrical units often located on telephone poles.

The EPA's own figures predict that capacitors will spill approximately 3.3 million pounds of PCB into the environment in the next 10 years.

The EPA presently is under court order to adopt new PCB regulations by August 19.

Though the agency claims that stricter PCB regulations would be too costly, Dr. Kimbrough of the Center for Disease Control said she believes the government "should try to control as much as possible the amount of PCB released into the environment."

Because the chemical enters the food chain and lodges itself in the fatty tissues of humans and animals, "it takes years to break down," she pointed out.

Kimbrough added that the difficulty of proving chronic health effects argues for more research, not fewer restrictions. "The generation exposed to PCB through mother's milk, the food chain, water, the air — we don't have any idea what will happen to those people," she said.

PCB-ARCH-EXT0376108