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Star

Firm Is Curbing Suspect Chemical

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PCB is the shorthand name of a family of 210 chemical substances, some of which have had widespread use in the United States since the early 1930s.

Because of mounting evidence that the PCBs are toxic to animals and, like DDT, do not easily break down in nature, the Monsanto Company, the nation's sole manufacturer of PCBs, has been quietly moving various products containing it off the market.

By last August, according to William B. Papageorge, manager of environmental protection for Monsanto, the company had stopped selling it except for use in closed systems, such as in large electric transformers, heat transfer units and in electric capacitors.

It was felt that it would be highly unlikely that the chemical could pose a danger when its use was restricted to such closed systems, Papageorge explained.

But in mid-July a heat exchange unit, used in a plant in Wilmington, N.C., in a process designed to remove the bacteria from imported fish meal, was found to be leaking.

The result was the possibility that millions of chickens and other livestock may have been eating contaminated feed.

According to Rep. William F. Ryan, D-N.Y., who has been studying the effects of the chemical for two years, the possibility of such a danger has been known for many months.

Ryan introduced a bill Monday which would ban the sale of PCBs in the United States. He told the House that he has urged the Department of Agriculture, the secretary of Interior, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration repeatedly to ban PCBs.

Today, he called for hearings on his bill and the action by the federal agencies.

The leakage in Wilmington, he said, "tragically illustrates the failure of the federal government to take preventive action against the unconscionable use of this deadly chemical."

The Nixon administration meanwhile, is pushing for legislation that could lead to tight regulation of industrial chemicals like PCB.

Warren Muir of the Council on Environmental Quality said today that the PCBs are a good example of toxic substances not adequately covered under existing law.

Under the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, the federal government could draw up standards that might regulate

the discharge of PCBs into the air or water. This has not been done.

The administration's Toxic Substances Act, due for hearings next week before the Senate Commerce Committee, would permit the government to regulate the manufacture and every use of such chemicals as well as regulating them as effluents.

The evidence that PCBs, like DDT, can concentrate and travel through the food chain was discovered by Swedish scientists in 1968, when they found the chemical in the carcasses of large birds of prey, primarily eagles. Later they found it in other birds, fish and evergreen needles. Since then it has been found in man.

In tests on mice, it causes liver damage and birth defects.

According to Rep. Ryan, federal authorities have already had notice of two instances where state authorities, alarmed by PCB contamination, have had to remove large quantities of food from the market.

In 1970, he stated, the Campbell's Soup Company discovered that a shipment of chickens it received from New York state contained a high percentage of one type of PCB.

The New York State Department of Agriculture ultimately destroyed 146,000 chickens and traced the chemical to plastic wrapping used to package chicken feed, Rep. Ryan said.

That same year, Rep. Ryan said, the Ohio State Department of Agriculture found a residue of PCB in milk. They removed a large quantity from the market and traced the chemical to a

material used to line slots, where cattle feed was stored.

Exactly how much PCB is still being produced is a secret which Monsanto, the sole manufacturer, refuses to disclose.

According to Papageorge, a chemical engineer, PCB, or polychlorinated biphenyl, was first developed in the early 1930s by the Swann Chemical Co. in Anniston, Ala., and later taken over by Monsanto.

Until recently, PCBs were marketed in some industrial paints, coatings, inks, and in some plastics.

Now, because of Monsanto's change in marketing policy, it is produced only for use as an insulator in capacitors, an electric device found in home air conditioners; as a coolant in transformers; and as a fire resistant

medium in heat exchange units.

According to Papageorge, total removal of PCBs from some of these closed system uses will be "next to impossible."

He pointed out that large cities in the U.S. and many other countries use electric transformers containing PCB because it is an explosion proof coolant, allowing the transformers to be safely used in densely populated areas.

There is no substitute chemical with the same properties and switching to a different cooling system, such as air or gas, would mean drastically redesigning the transformers in use, he said.

"Our entire electrical system depends on it," concluded Papageorge. "Believe me," he added, "if we could get out of this business, we would."

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