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Monsanto Plans To Halt PCB Output

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Monsanto Co. says it hopes to phase out production of PCBs, the industrial chemical that has become a widespread pollutant, within three years.

Monsanto's Sauget, Ill., plant near St. Louis is the only domestic producer of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). The substance is a chemically stable fluid used as an insulator in certain electrical equipment.

The company cut off sales of the chemical in 1971 except to the electrical industry. But PCBs still are found polluting every major United States watershed that has been tested, including the Yukon River.

Some fish from Lake Michigan and the Hudson River are so contaminated that they are unfit to eat.

PCBs have caused skin disease and liver problems in human beings. In laboratory experiments, monkeys fed PCBs had a high rate of miscarriages and sickly infants and rats developed liver cancer.

William B. Papageorge, Monsanto's manager of product acceptability, said the company had wanted to phase out PCBs since 1970 because of the chemical's persistence in the environment.

A final, although indefinite, phase-out was announced yesterday because substitutes will be developed soon for use in electrical capacitors and transformers where PCBs are used, Papageorge said.

Monsanto is testing a substitute in capacitors, which are installed in motors and applicances to store small amounts of electricity for use in starting. They are commonly found in television sets, refrigerators, air conditioners and fluorescent lights, among other things.

But work is not so far along on a PCB substitute for transformers, which are connected to power lines to reduce high transmission voltage to the level used by the customer.

The possibility of fire is greater in a transformer than in a capacitor, so a substitute for the PCB insulator fluid is harder to find, Papageorge said. He said the company hoped to develop one within three years.

Before 1971, PCBs were used in a variety of products — paints, sealants, adhesives and in the encapsulated fluid that contained the ink on the back of carbonless duplicating paper.

The substance, which is chemically related to DDT, accumulates in the fat of those who eat it and has been found in disturbingly large quantities in fish and ocean-feeding birds. Because it breaks down very slowly, the substance has persisted in the environment despite the fact that it has been used only in closed electrical systems since 1971.

At a conference on PCBs last November, assistant secretary of the Interior Nathaniel P. Reed called for eventually phasing out all use of PCBs because the chemical was putting lakes and streams "in mortal danger."

Reed said federal and local governments had spent 17 years and $18,000,000 replenishing Great Lakes fisheries. But PCB contamination threatens to undermine the entire effort by making the fish unfit to eat, he said.

In addition to causing an environmental controversy, PCBs became the focus of a policy disagreement between the Federal Government and industry over how to control harmful chemicals.

The Environmental Protection Agency has called for passage of a toxic substances control act to deal with problems such as PCBs.

Papageorge accused the federal agency of publicizing the PCB problem to win approval of the act. He said adequate laws on the subject were on the books. The act still is being considered by congressional committees.

When asked for comment on the Monsanto decision to phase out production, a federal agency spokesman said, "We love it."

Papageorge said Monsanto's voluntary move was unrelated to the controversy over the toxic substances act.

Monsanto employs 50 to 75 people in connection with PCB production, Papageorge said, but they will be shifted to other jobs rather than be laid off.

Although Monsanto is the only U.S. producer of PCBs, the chemical is a minor product in comparison with the company's over-all sales, he said.

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