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Toxic Chemical Proves Environment Problem

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NEW YORK — If you wanted to pick the best place for a toxic chemical to get into the environment and cause widespread health problems, where would you put it?

How about in marine paints on the outside of boats so it washes into the water? Or in highway stripes so it washes into the soil? Or in 600 million fluorescent light fixtures, billions of sheets of paper and countless appliances so that it would be almost impossible to retrieve it?

That is what has been allowed to happen during the past five decades with a group of flame-retardant chemicals called PCBS, polychlorinated biphenyls. They came into wide use as an insulator in electrical equipment and as a preservative in numerous other items. Now they have been shown to cause cancer and reproductive failure in test animals and skin lesions in people.

Nine years ago, the first serious illnesses were reported in humans from PCB poisoning — February, 1968, in Yusho, Japan. Five years ago, Japan banned the chemical and an American interagency task force concluded that PCBS are highly persistent, could be found in all parts of the environment and could have serious adverse effects on human health.

And during the past four years, the Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council, two leading American environmental groups, petitioned and sued the federal government, demanding strict regulations to limit domestic use of the chemical and its exposures to the population.

Yet the federal government still has not set minimum allowable limits that many scientists consider safe for all segments of society in the consumption of PCB-contaminated fish, the chemical's chief pathway to people. Further, there are no regulations to prevent the hundreds of millions of pounds of the toxic chemical now in use from getting into the environment and causing more harm.

In February, the federal government banned discharges of PCBS into the environment as of Feb. 3, 1978. Monsanto Chemical Co., the nation's sole supplier of PCBS, has announced it will cease making the chemical by Oct. 31 of this year.

But since the Yusho incident, Monsanto has produced more than 600 million pounds of PCBS, and thousands of pounds have been discharged into the environment by industries, homeowners, businesses and a multitude of other sources. The Food and Drug Administration is proposing to lower by 90 per cent permissible levels of contamination in fish sold for food, but even then, it concedes, the doses will not be safe enough for children and women of child-bearing ages to eat more than four meals of such fish per month.

The Environmental Protection Agency is preparing regulations for the safe disposal of the more than three-quarters of a billion pounds of PCBS still in use. It was supposed to enact the regulations by July 1, but it wasn't ready. The proposals pointedly exempt a large portion of the PCBS from regulation, because the agency doesn't know how to collect the substance. The agency's office of toxic substances is still grappling with the problem.

Highland's group first sued the EPA in 1973 because it had not limited discharges of toxic chemicals, as provided in the water pollution control act of 1972. The EPA then tried to propose limits for nine chemicals but was overwhelmed by industry attorneys in 1974. After further court suits, Russell Train, in one of his final actions as outgoing EPA administrator, signed the discharge ban on Jan. 18 of this year — more than four years after the discharge standards were mandated by Congress.

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