Banning PCBs

A federal agency spokesman concerned with the environment has naturally welcomed the announcement by the Monsanto Co. of St. Louis that it hopes to phase out the production of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), a widespread and hazardous water pollutant. As the only U.S. maker of PCBs, Monsanto's production phase out, and its expected introduction of a safe substitute, would obviously have a bearing on a serious environmental problem.

But Monsanto's action will not solve the problem. Even though the company since 1971 has sold the product only for closed electrical systems (which provide some protection against its escape into the environment) U.S. users of PCBs are still obtaining supplies from foreign producers for nonenclosed uses such as hand soaps and copying ink toners.

PCBs, which have been found to cause severe skin and liver problems in humans and cancer in laboratory animals, are still escaping into the environment at the rate of about 10,000,000 pounds a year. The long-lasting pollutant has been detected in every major U.S. watershed and in some is having a serious impact on fisheries and bird life. Although the Environmental Protection Agency has proposed guidelines to control discharges and spills of PCBs, its action is not likely to have a quick effect in eliminating a severe health and environmental danger. Nor is the broad hazardous substances legislation being sought by the Ford Administration likely to be expeditiously passed.

That is why Congress should give prompt attention to a narrow bill by Senator Gaylord Nelson to ban all use of PCBs in nonenclosed situations immediately and in all enclosed situations within a year if there are viable and safe alternatives.