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PCBs: spreading contamination

It wasn't too long after Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" was published 15 years ago that DDT became a dirty word. The book detailed the adverse effect of pesticides, particularly DDT, on the environment. Ten years after "Silent Spring," the Environmental Protection Agency banned the domestic use of DDT.

But it wasn't until four years ago that any type of controls — and these were voluntary — were placed on a group of industrial pollutants known as PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls.

PCBs may be a worse threat to the environment than DDT.

In use since 1929, PCBs have been used mainly as cooling fluids in electrical transformers, as fluids for electromagnets, as heat-transfer fluids and as plasticizers for waxes and adhesives. They are also used in paints, printing inks and carbonless "carbon" paper.

PCBs are far more resistant to degradation by natural forces than DDT, and for that reason the amount of PCBs in the environment either has exceeded or soon will, the amounts of DDT.

Once in the environment, PCBs leak into the food chain and end up in humans where they produce severe ailments, including a skin disease and liver problems. And researchers have found evidence that the pollutants are toxic at much lower levels than previously believed.

Although concern about PCBs has been aired before, it was not until 1973 that the EPA recommended production curbs on the pollutants. Mon-

santo Corporation, the only domestic producer of PCBs, agreed to voluntarily stop selling the material to those customers who released them into the environment. The agreement did little to abate the pollution. American users of PCBs who were cut off by Monsanto simply turned to European suppliers, and because the pollutants are almost indestructible, the contamination spread.

Concentrations of the toxic chemicals in many species of Hudson River fish has forced New York state officials to plan a ban on commercial fishing along the waterway.

Traces of PCBs have been found far from industrial areas — such as in the Hudson, the Great Lakes, the upper Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico.

Five years ago, researchers detected some levels of PCBs in Mississippi's Leaf River system, which runs from north of Hattiesburg to the southeastern part of the state. Yet, there is no industry in Mississippi using the chemicals in production as far as state officials know.

An awesome amount of evidence has been compiled on the toxic pollutants, but as yet, Congress has still to act. The EPA considers PCBs a high-priority item and has cited the chemicals in its call for passage of the long-proposed Toxic Substance Control Act. Industrial opposition to certain provisions of the act have prevented strict controls from being placed on PCBs and while Congress dawdles, the contamination spreads.

Apparently nothing short of a pandemic disease will prompt legislation totally banning the substance.