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Interior Aide Urges Curbs on Use of PCB Chemical

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CHICAGO, Nov. 21—Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nathaniel P. Reed said today that the Federal Government must impose a ban on the use of a potentially harmful group of chemicals except in certain electrical equipment.

Asserting that the nation's rivers and lakes were "in mortal danger" from the chemicals, polychlorinated biphenals, he said that the chemicals' use should be confined to electrical transformers and capacitors.

Mr. Reed also said that even the use of the chemicals, known as PCB's, in such equipment—regarded as relatively safe by the manufacturers but not by environmental scientists—must be "immediately and critically reviewed" and that all substitutes must be evaluated so that PCB's can be completely eliminated from industrial use.

PCB's produced abroad are being used in such things as die casting, fireproof sealants and various kinds of coatings. PCB's produced in the United States have been voluntarily limited in the last four years to so-called "closed cycle" systems in capacitors and transformers. The sole United States manufacturer is the Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Company of St. Louis.

The PCB's contaminate the environment when industrial and municipal wastes are disposed of either in the burning of refuse or leaking from dumps or release from sewage treatment plants.

Mr. Reed delivered his speech on the third and final day of a conference on PCBs, and it was by far the strongest statement against their continued use by a major government official.

Mr. Reed said he was "deeply shocked by the pervasiveness of PCB's; they are literally everywhere." He said he was "very troubled by the exceedingly high levels found in fish from all our drainage systems." He emphasized that he did not mean just the Hudson River and the Great Lakes—which have serious and widely publicized PCB problems — but countless waterways in all parts of the country.

He said that PCB's posed an immediate threat to efforts to preserve and protect endangered species of fish and mammals. "Under present conditions," he warned, "PCB's may very well pull the rug out from beneath us by destroying marginal species in spite of our best efforts for preservation."

Mr. Reed said that the United States Environmental Protection Agency, which sponsored the conference, had the responsibility for limiting or banning PCB's in the environment.

"Quite frankly, I am thoroughly disgusted by the gnashing of teeth, wailing and rubbing of hands," Mr. Reed said. "To the agencies which have enforcement responsibilities—a word on behalf of the bewildered but concerned American people—get on with it!"

The fact that Mr. Reed advocates tight PCB control and elimination of all PCB's from the environment within three years does not mean that action will be taken in the near future.

The E.P.A. Administrator, Russell E. Train, who opened the meeting on Wednesday, said he thought the way to control PCB's was for Congress to enact quickly a toxic substance control act that has been pending for several years.

Mr. Train also said he was reluctant to order any individual industries to refrain from dumping PCB's into the environment by using Section 504 of the Federal Water Pollution Control Amendments Act of 1972 because "there is a question as to whether it would hold up in court."

After his speech today, Mr. Reed was asked what would happen if Congress did not pass the toxic substances control act that Mr. Train says he needs.

"That is an interesting question," he said. "While we are poisoning ourselves we're hassling over whether the Federal Water Pollution Control Act gives the administrator the right to save our lives."

PBC's have caused liver cancer and reproductive failures in laboratory animals, and some of the General Electric workers using the chemicals in New York State have complained of allergic dermatitis, nausea, dizziness, eye and nasal irritation, asthmatic bronchitis and fungus infections.

PCB's have been used in manufacturing processes since 1930 but they were not detected as ubiquitous elements in the environment until 1966. For many years, they were confused with DDT, with which they have a similar chemical structure.

As of today, the E.P.A. indicated it was undecided as to how best to proceed with a quick resolution of the PCB problem.

Walter C. Barber, director of the Standards and Regulations Division of E.P.A.'s Office of Planning and Evaluation, said, "I don't know what we're going to do," when he appeared before the conference today.

It was also clear that Federal officials were not in complete agreement among themselves about the scope of the PCB problem.

"We are the straight men in a bad joke," said Dr. Albert C. Kolbye, associate director for sciences in the Bureau of Foods, Food and Drug Administration. He said he felt the average consumer "is fairly well protected against PCB's."

Mr. Reed said he could not justify spending millions of dollars to establish fisheries while continued pollution renders each new growth of this resource malignant."

He added, "If we don't do something now, we'll have a failure within the Federal system."

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