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PCBs: Is the end in sight?

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) have been widely used in manufacturing since 1929, but it was not until 1966 that it was discovered that they were extremely toxic to fish and wildlife and that unless their production were strictly controlled, they could be hazardous to humans. Some scientists, in fact, now regard PCBs as one of the most dangerous chemical compounds made by man.

In 1972, under pressure from the federal government, the sole producer of PCBs in the United States, Monsanto Co., voluntarily stopped selling PCBs for non-essential uses such as paints, coatings and the like. Monsanto continued to make them for use as insulating fluids in electrical capacitors and transformers. Industries using PCBs argued that there were no workable substitutes and that the PCB concentrations that were being found in humans were too low to cause harm, anyway.

But PCBs continued to be found—in fish taken from the Mississippi River's Lake Pepin, for example. New medical studies revealed that the human health hazard was even more widespread than had been suspected previously. Finally, last November, a senior U.S. official, Nathaniel Reed, assistant secretary of the interior, called for a federal ban on their use. PCBs, he said, "represent an ubiquitous degenerative influence on our national health and well-being. . . . I am thoroughly disgusted by the gnashing of teeth, wailing and rubbing of hands. To the agencies that have the enforcement responsibilities—a word on behalf of the bewildered and concerned American people: Get on with it."

This week Monsanto announced that as soon as a "usable, acceptable" substitute for PCBs could be found, it would shut down its PCB manufacturing unit. Work on substitutes has been going on for some years. Dow Corning Corp., for instance, claims that it has developed one—polydimethyl siloxane—that is being used successfully in Japan, where PCB production was banned in 1972.

Monsanto's move was a wise one. Pressure for a total PCB ban is growing. Several states are considering bans, Minnesota among them. Bills have been introduced in Congress to control PCBs in interstate commerce. And the federal Environmental Protection Agency is proposing regulations that would severely limit discharges into rivers and streams—regulations that would amount to much the same as an outright ban.

Halting U.S. production of PCBs, however, will not completely end their use in the United States. Many U.S. users of PCBs who were cut off by Monsanto in 1972 are obtaining supplies from European producers for use in hand soaps, inks and other products that contribute to pollution. Those sources should be curtailed, too.

But even when all sources of PCBs are cut off, the pollution problem will remain; PCBs are far more resistant than even DDT to degradation by nature, and in many places their accumulation in the environment either has exceeded or may soon exceed that of DDT. Then will come the job of cleaning them up. We hope science and industry can come up with some answers for that problem.

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