

The Grand Rapids Press
GRAND RAPIDS, MICH.
D 125,545 SUN. 138,782

AUG 18 1978 *gfk*

PCB Controls Lag

Health hazards arising from what was once thought to be harmless use and disposal of chemicals appear to be making newspapers daily. The stories point clearly to a greater effort directed toward identifying possible toxic substances and sharply reducing the time in which legalities are argued and direct action is taken. A classic case involves polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) and contaminated farm silos.

PCB, which has been manufactured since 1929, was initially identified as a possible serious health hazard 10 years ago. But the federal Environmental Protection Agency will only get around to conducting a public hearing this Monday on rules to ban the manufacture, processing or distribution of PCBs.

The chronology of PCBs tells the sad tale:

1929 — PCBs first used commercially, primarily as insulating fluids in electrical equipment but also used in the production of adhesives, inks, waxes and sealants.

1968 — One thousand Japanese are found to be seriously ailing after having eaten rice oil contaminated with PCBs. Japan has since banned all production and importation of PCBs.

1972 — The U.S. government first recommended PCB production curbs, and Monsanto, the primary American producer, stopped selling it to customers who were releasing it into the environment. Later millions of pounds of PCBs were found in the Hudson and Mississippi rivers, the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists are unable to predict how long traces will be found in waterlife or bottom sediments and whether the chemical will spread upward in the food chain.

1976 — The Toxic Substances Control Act gave the EPA the power to control or stop production of substances hazardous to the health or environment.

1977 — Monsanto, the only remaining PCB producer, voluntarily stopped the manufacture.

1978 — Dairy farms are closed in Kentucky and Indiana, and others may be shut down in six other states, including Michigan, as a result of PCBs used as sealants in silos built from the 1940s through the 1960s.

The PCB story of slow-motion contamination, detection and prohibition has been, and will be, repeated with other chemicals. The delays on controls are inexplicable and inexcusable.

When the nation's president, Congress and drug manufacturers can be mobilized within months to stamp out a virtually nonexistent swine flu epidemic, one wonders, what does it take to more quickly draw up formal rules to control highly toxic chemicals?