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State to Push Hunt for PCBs As Poison Pollutant in Waters

By HENRY W. PIERCE
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

An informal task force is being formed in Harrisburg to help integrate the search for poisonous industrial chemicals called PCBs which may be fouling the state's waterways.

Howard Chapman, associate deputy secretary for air, water and community protection, said yesterday the five-member group includes representatives of the state offices directly involved in the search.

"We are organizing on an informal basis to provide a way to communicate and keep together," Chapman said.

Represented, he said, will be bureaus concerned with water and air quality, solid waste and aquatic wildlife.

PCBs—polychlorinated biphenyls—have been linked to cancer and birth defects.

PCBs are used as an insulating fluid in electrical transformers, as a constituent in synthetic wax, in varnishes, in specialty inks and in no-carbon reproduction paper.

They were even used to coat the insides of silos until traces of them turned up in the milk of cows that had eaten silage stored in the tall towers.

Now they have been reported in mothers' milk in Pennsylvania and nine other states, according to preliminary findings of a nationwide survey by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). George Wirth, chief of the special chemicals division of the EPA's Office of Toxic Substances, said confirmation of the findings is expected later this week.

Fish dinners are one route by which PCBs may get into a person's body. Although most industries do not routinely dump PCBs in rivers—PCBs are very costly—spills do occur, with subsequent ingestion by fish.

Fish from 67 sampling sites in Pennsylvania—21 of them in the Ohio River basin—are being examined by specialists from the office of Edward Brezina, the state's aquatic biology chief.

Brezina said his group is "mainly concerned with the PCB content in the edible portion of fish" — as distinct from the total body content, which may be higher.

With this in mind, Brezina and his colleagues have been taking samples of filets from largemouth and smallmouth bass, bluegills, channel catfish, brown bullheads, white suckers and carp.

The samples are being analyzed by a New York chemical firm, with results expected Sept. 17, Brezina said.

"We anticipate we will find PCBs in some streams," Brezina noted. "If the data show some stations with high PCB levels, we will make more intensive studies at those sites."

High levels, according to federal standards, would be five parts per million or more.

Monitoring of public water supplies in the Pittsburgh area showed no significant levels of PCBs last year. Dana Boob, a state sanitary engineer, said no PCBs were found in water from Western Pennsylvania Water Co., Pittsburgh municipal water works, the Ambridge Water Co., or water supplies serving McKeesport, Butler, Fayette, Charleroi or Johnstown.

A small amount—six parts per trillion—was found in the Southwestern Pennsylvania Water Co. in Waynesburg, Greene County.

Samples from a second survey, which included 134 water supplies and water quality network stations in the state, were due yesterday. Analysis is to be carried out by Pennsylvania State University.

Jose Del Rio, the district's regional sanitary engineer for the state Department of Environmental Resources, said industrial discharges of PCBs are believed so slight here "the effects are minimal." Pittsburgh's closest brush with a massive exposure to the chemicals came about three years ago when a truck carrying an interstate shipment of PCBs sprang a leak during a stopover in Lawrenceville. Police, firemen and Health Department officials supervised the cleanup.

In Washington last week, the U.S. House voted to ban the manufacture of PCBs within three years. The move to ban PCBs is included in an amendment to a toxic substances control bill that would give additional muscle to the head of the EPA. The U.S. Senate passed a similar bill without the amendment.

PCBs are manufactured by Monsanto Chemical Co. In 1970 Monsanto began phasing out orders where it had no control over PCB usage.

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