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Chemical Confusion

Impersonator of DDT Found

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(State Journal Farm Editor)

The head of the chemistry department of the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF) testified Wednesday that a compound that can be confused with DDT has been found in about 3,000 tests analyzed in his laboratory.

Finding the compound known as PCBs (polycholrinated biphenyls) may cloud findings of DDT residues in wildlife species.

THE TESTIMONY came from Francis B. Coon, head of the WARF department in which 25 persons work making continuous analysis of DDT residues.

Coon testified that PCBs show a nearly identical response to that of DDT on a gas chromatograph. The instrument is used to give a reading of the chemical compounds that may be present in a sample.

Victor Yannacone Jr., attorney for the Environmental Defense Fund and representing two Wisconsin groups seeking a ban on DDT, spent nearly the entire day cross-examining Coon to challenge his standing as a scientist and the reputation of the WARF laboratory.

One of the WARF residue tests questioned was that made on a sample of coho salmon from Lake Michigan. The tests were made at the request of Madison Atty. Willard Stafford for the National Agricultural Chemicals Assn.

COON MAINTAINED that, until the confusion between DDT and PCBs was discovered, the gas chromatographic tests on the amount of DDT present in a sample actually was over-stated because of the presence of PCBs.

Of the 3,000 samples that Coon said had PCBs present, 30 samples were given further checks by the laboratory to find the PCBs.

"We did not find PCBs in all cases. There were a few in which we thought we saw PCBs," Coon said.

The PCBs also are called plasticizing agents and are chemical compounds found in a variety of products, especially artificial rubber.

In his testimony, Coon said that, while there have been high DDT residue findings in birds and fish, the recent work on PCBs casts doubt on abnormal measurements of DDT because of PCBs masking ability and similarity to DDT.

THE PCBs CAUSED "false peaks" in gas chromatography readings where DDT should have been indicated. The error was traced to PCBs in work by British and Swedish scientists about two years ago.

To the layman, the graph shows a line with peaks and valleys, but, with measurements, a scientist can read them in a way that fingerprints can be identified.

At one point, Yannacone introduced a second set of graphs to test Coon's ability, and Stafford objected to the introduction of the material that to him looked like the tracing of a profile of Mt. Everest.

But Maurice Van Susteren, hearing officer, allowed introduction of the evidence, even though he looked at it as a stock value line reflecting the value of one of his drug stocks.

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