GREENEVILLE, TENN.
SUN
D. 11,000

DEC 29 1975

U. S. Concern Grows Over Food Contamination

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The Christian Science Monitor
News Service

Washington - Global contamination of the food chain with toxic chemicals appears likely unless a new U.S. drive to ban dangerous substances proves successful, federal officials report.

The most immediate threat comes from PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), a group of chemicals commonly found in milk, eggs, poultry, and fish. The Environmental Protection Agency has been seeking to curb the PCB spread but without much legal muscle.

Similar in structure to the banned-pesticide DDT, the more ubiquitous PCBs were thought to be under control in 1972. But a dramatic jump in PCBs occurred in the U.S. because of imports and the ignoring by American companies of environmental guidelines. Now the potentially hazardous chemical has been detected in some drinking water in Illinois, Indiana, California, and Massachusetts.

Mounting evidence of their serious threat to the environment and to human health led to the announcement this week by EPA administrator Russell E. Train that the agency will crack down on industrial plants which dump PCBs into the nation's waterways.

In January, Mr. Train plans to sit down in Washington with representatives of 30 companies that use PCBs in the manufacture of electrical equipment - its most common usage. If he cannot convince them to agree to a zero discharge of PCBs from their plants, then he will seek further action in February against the companies under the 1972 Water Pollution Act.

Used in a variety of products since 1930, PCBs were first noticed to be toxic and pervasive in 1966. Their use in Japan was curbed after 1,000 people in 1968 suffered serious effects from accidental exposure.

With a starting date of 1977, the EPA curb may fall under possible court challenge to the agency's enforcement power. Moreover, about two-thirds of the PCB users and manufacturers in the U.S. are unaffected by the contemplated action because they use municipal sewage treatment systems.

Assistant Secretary of Interior Nathaniel P. Reed says quick action is needed against PCBs to keep the nation's lakes and rivers out of "mortal danger." Many animal preservation efforts may fail in PCBs are not removed, says Mr. Reed.

Although the effects if PCBs have been known for years, the EPA has been slow to move — mainly because it doubts that it has the authority under the 1972 act.

However, the problem could be solved, says Mr. Train, if Congress empowered EPA to regulate the manufacture and importation of substances such as PCBs by passing the proposed Toxic Substances Control Act. Passed in 1973 by both houses, the act failed when a compromise bill was not worked out in conference.

Excessive amounts of the chemical have been found in fish in the Ohio river, in the oysters of Florida bay, in the Great Lakes, in the Hudson and Housatonic Rivers, and in many other American waters. It serves as a liquid fire resistant and electrically insulating chemical for heavy-duty electrical capacitors and transformers. No adequate substitute has been found yet.

MONS 032899