PCB Detoxicant Unveiled; No Panacea, Some Contend

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WASHINGTON — A new chemical process designed to destroy the toxic nature of PCBs is no panacea and will have only limited application, any officials at the St. Louis-based Monsanto Co.

The firm was the prime manufacturer of PCBs before production was barred in 1979.

The process in question was developed by Sunohio, an Ohio subsidiary of Sun Co. and the Ohio Transformer Corp. It was disclosed Tuesday with considerable fanfare at the headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Edward H. Clark, acting assistant administrator for pesticides and toxic substances, hailed the new process, saying that it "could be of significant value in solving the nationwide PCB problem."

Sunohio officials went further. A promotional film developed by the company noted the presence of at least 700 million pounds of long-lived PCBs, (polychlorinated biphenyls) in the American environment and the shortcomings of past efforts to dispose of the substances.

"But now the dilemma is solved," the film proclaims, implying that Sunohio's process — dubbed PCBX — will go a long way

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toward eradicating the public health hazard posed by the PCBs. They were used widely as coolants in electrical transformers and capacitors.

The notion that PCBs can be eradicated by the new process is "totally incorrect," says John H. Craddock, product and environmental safety director for Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co.

Monsanto was the leading domestic manufacturer of PCBs between 1929 and 1977, when it discontinued production in the face of mounting evidence linking PCBs to reproductive failures, birth defects, tumors and other illnesses. Since then, Monsanto has followed closely the search for safe disposal methods.

"The great bulk of the PCBs out there now will still be there, even with this new process," Craddock said. In subsequent interviews, officials at both Sunohio and the EPA conceded that Craddock was right.

The fine print of the EPA's announcement Tuesday said that Sunohio has authority to operate its process in just two of the EPA's regions — one of which, Region VII, includes Missouri — and only on a type of transformer that contains mineral oil.

Clark sought to play down the limitation at the press conference, noting that more than 90 percent of the nation's transformers are of the mineral oil variety.

But such transformers contain only trace amounts of PCBs, rarely in excess of 500 parts of PCBs for each million parts of oil.

The EPA's own estimates, made available later Tuesday, indicate that about 35 million mineral-oil transformers contain about 400,000 pounds of PCBs. This is the target pool for the Sunohio process.

But the Sunohio process has not been approved for use on about 140,000 transformers that contain PCB concentrations of 40 or 50 percent — about 300 million pounds in total. Nor does it have any application for the 400 million pounds of PCB solids in electrical capacitors.

David Gibson, marketing director for Sunohio, confirmed in a telephone interview Tuesday the limited initial application of the process. But he insisted that the company is poised for a much larger demonstration of the clean-up market.

"You always start slow, work your way into something like this," he said. He said Sunohio has demonstrated its ability to handle pure PCBs and plans to take on the entire PCB transformer market in the near future.

Otis D. Jordan, co-inventor of the process and a Sunohio vice president, also pointed to the demonstration last October as proof that no technical glitches bar use of the process on pure PCBs.

The issue, he said, is purely economic: whether the public will demand alternatives to incinerators for PCB disposal.

In taking issue with Craddock's criticism, Jordan said, "Monsanto's opinion on this is like asking Jimmy Carter's opinion of Ronald Reagan. They created this problem in the first place, and I haven't seen where they've done anything about it."

EPA officials were less sanguine when questioned later.

William Gunter, an official of the agency's toxic substances branch, noted that Sunohio's present equipment — set up in a tractor-trailer truck for easy transportation — could not handle the large volumes of solid waste and more sophisticated heat-reduction requirements of high-concentration PCBs.

As for the Sunohio officials' contention that their prices will be competitive with those of the two incinerators now licensed to burn PCB-contaminated waste, Gunter said, "I think they're optimistic."

But in general, EPA officials defend the Sunohio process as a promising element in the overall campaign to eradicate PCBs. Even if the process does no more than treat low-concentration mineral oils, Gunter noted, it will ease the present burden on the incinerators and EPA-approved landfills.

Gunter also said that he saw nothing unusual in the EPA's supplying a highly visible forum for a private company to test a new product.