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Briceland, Illinois EPA chief, opposes ban on PCB chemicals

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) - Illinois' top environmental official says he does not favor passing a law to control use of PCBs, chemicals which some experts claim are threatening wildlife and human health.

"These (claims) are very scary to me... but on the other hand some drastic actions can become counterproductive," Richard H. Briceland, director of the state Environmental Protection Agency, said Tuesday.

Briceland said a ban on PCBs could force use of substitute chemicals that are even worse.

"The health related data (on the effects of PCBs) is very questionable, the impact is very questionable," he said.

Briceland's comments came in testimony before the House Committee on Environment, Energy and Natural Resources, which is considering legislation to curtail severely the amount of PCBs in commercial products.

PCBs became a focus of world concern in 1968 when more than 1,200 Japanese suffered adverse effects after eating rice oil contaminated by the chemicals. Officials say the oil flows from a Lake Michigan plant's leaky containment walls.

The plant, owned by the Great Lakes Paper Co., is one of several in the area that produce PCBs.

chemicals "probably could be handled through the existing system (of state regulation)."

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are liquid compounds that for the past four decades have been used in such products as paints, inks, electric transformers, fluorescent lights, air conditioners and other electrical equipment.

Karl E. Bremer, a regional official of the U.S. EPA, told the committee that medical records show cases of skin lesions and irritation among workers involved in manufacturing PCBs.

In the Japanese incident skin pigmentation problems, lesions, eye discharges, miscarriages and stillbirths resulted, said Bremer.

He said that in the United States, PCBs have been manufactured by a single producer, the Monsanto Chemical Co. The firm now limits PCB sales to use in closed electrical systems and plans to phase out its sales depending on the availability of alternative fluids, he said.

But Bremer said there have been reports of PCBs being imported for other uses, and they continued to be found in fish from the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. He said it is not clear whether the fish are contaminated by the water or by the fish themselves. He said the U.S. EPA is studying the problem and may recommend a ban on the use of fish from the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico.

chubs exceed the (U. S.) Food and Drug Administration's temporary tolerance level of five parts per million," said Bremer. "These concentrations have not decreased since 1972."

James D. Griffith, reprieve called PCB Gone, told the committee that "Lake Michigan, the many small lakes of Illinois, every fisherman and every person who has fish as a part of his diet is threatened by PCBs."

Griffith said Indiana and Michigan already have enacted legislation controlling PCBs, and such laws are pending in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

"It is, ladies and gentlemen, an emergency," said Griffith. "Illinois is a little behind these other states, and I hope (the law) will be enacted this session."

But Briceland said state officials have never been given a satisfactory explanation of why the FDA set its tolerance level for PCBs at five parts per million in fish. The FDA acted "very arbitrarily," he said.

Briceland said the state EPA has found only one firm making a significant contribution to the PCB contamination of Lake Michigan - Outboard Marine Corp. of Wisconsin. Briceland said the company is not a major manufacturer of outboard motors, but it is a major manufacturer of outboard motor parts. He said the company is not a major manufacturer of outboard motors, but it is a major manufacturer of outboard motor parts.