PCB Contamination Threat Told

By F.N. D'Alessio
Associated Press

CHICAGO, Nov. 22—Contamination of water by toxic chemicals called PCBs is rapidly becoming a nationwide threat to fisheries, wildlife and human health, experts have told a conference here.

Assistant Secretary of Interior Nathaniel P. Reed, speaking at a three-day National Conference on Polychlorinated Biphenyls, said the nation must respond immediately to the dangers raised by PCBs because "they represent an ubiquitous degenerative influence on our national health and well-being."

PCBs, which chemically resemble DDT, were developed in the 1930s for use in products ranging from hydraulic fluids to carbonless paper and electrical transformers and capacitors.

They are widely used in electrical and other industrial equipment because they are an efficient heast exchanger—conducting heat but not electricity—and are not flammable. All alternative materials that conduct heat but not electricity are flammable, according to Russell E. Train, head of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Extensive tests have found traces of PCBs in fish from every major U.S. watershed, Reed said Friday, including such rivers as the Mississippi, Missouri, Merrimac, Ohio, Columbia, Sacramento, Rio Grande, Connecticut and the Yukon.

Reed said the chemicals have so polluted the Great Lakes that imposition by the Food and Drug Administration of lower—and safer—allowable PCB levels in fish could end all commercial fishing in the region, a $86 million annual industry.

He also warned that PCBs could cause the imminent collapse of the $350 million-a-year sports-fishing tourist industry in the Upper Great Lakes.

PCB levels are endangering a 17-year, $175 million program to restock the Great Lakes, Reed said. "Nothing short of immediate drastic action will enable us to raise anything better than lakes full of eunuchized fish. With the present preponderance of PCBs, the lifespan of the Great Lakes fishery will be limited to a single generation."

Reed said he supports a "national ban on all domestic and imported PCBs destined for use other than in transformers and capacitors."

Reed's proposal was echoed by the National Fisheries Industry, representing seafood processors, and the state-federal Lake Michigan Toxic Substances Committee.

Spokesmen for the Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc., went further in their denunciation of the chemicals, calling for the complete phaseout of all PCB manufacture and use. The council also called for a ban on the import and export of PCBs.

Japan outlawed PCB use after contaminated rice oil caused more than 1,000 illnesses and was believed to have harmed several unborn infants.

Because of earlier environmental concern, the sole U.S. PCB producer, the Monsanto Corp., in 1971 limited its sales to the manufacturers of electrical transformers and capacitors.

At the PCB conference, the Environmental Protection Agency for the first time identified 10 industrial dischargers of PCBs into the nation's waters and said that 34 other electrical equipment-makers discharge PCBs into sewage treatment plants.

The 10 are General Electric plants at Pittsfield, Mass., Fort Edward and Hudson Falls, N.Y., and Rome, Ga.; Westinghouse Corp. plants at Sharon, Pa., and Bloomington, Ind.; the Sangamon Electric Co. plant in Pickens, S.C.; Universal Manufacturing Corp. in Totowa, N.J., and the Aerovox Industries and Cornell-Dubilier Electric Corp. plants in New Bedford, Mass.

The EPA also said 24 other plants, including Monsanto's PCB-producing plant at Sauget, Ill., and Universal Manufacturing's Bridgeport, Conn., plant, send their discharges into municipal water-treatment facilities, which may reduce the residue.

Current EPA guidelines permit PCB concentrations of 5.0 parts per million (ppm) in water not intended for human consumption. Reed said concentrations as low as 2.7 ppm of one PCB in rainbow trout eggs cause mortality in 75 per cent of the cases. In the test samples, more than 60 per cent of the trout fry that hatched were deformed. Reed said salmon eggs are more susceptible to PCB-induced destruction.

Reed said the United States and Canada have spent 17 years and more than $175 million in rehabilitating and restocking the Great Lakes with useful fish after a sea lamprey invasion almost wiped out commercial fishing.

If the stocking is stopped because of PCBs, Reed predicted, the lampreys will return and it will take at least 10 years of restocking in PCB-free waters to bring back any vestige of the fishing industry.

"The Great Lakes are a virtual 'sink' for PCBs," Reed said. "It takes more than 50 years for water to turn over in Lake Michigan.

"Moreover, with more than one-third of the U.S. population and an even greater proportion of the Canadian population living near lake shores, tons upon tons of PCB-infested materials are daily deposited into the Great Lakes receptacle."

Reed also linked PCBs to a possible extinction of many species of waterfowl, saying their effects may have helped cause the virtual disappearance of the once-common ospreys around Long Island Sound and the brown pelicans of Louisiana.

Agency's Assessment Also Hit

FEA Assails Gas Estimates

By Morton Mintz
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Federal Energy Administration believes that assessments of natural gas supplies this winter differing from its own assessment are "a pack of lies."

Accordingly, it has taped a public service message saying just that and had planned to offer the tapes to 3,500 radio stations in 14 states last week.

But the distribution was held up for review of various legal issues. At the same time three House Commerce subcommittee chairmen, who are energy experts, charged in a letter to FEA Administrator Frank G. Zarb that the message itself is "untrue."

The message is also part of an acknowledged FEA "advertising campaign" that may violate a law prohibiting an agency from spending appropriated funds to lobby Congress, said the chairmen, Reps. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.), Torbert H. Macdonald (D-Mass.) and John E. Moss (D-Calif.).

The legislators charged in their letter that FEA's predicted "catastrophic" shortages "are based on information developed by the gas industry to stampede the Congress into deregulating natural gas" in order to raise prices substantially.

Moreover, they said, stations carrying the message would be obligated under the government's "fairness doctrine" to give opponents of deregulation an opportunity to reply.

An FEA spokesman told a reporter that the agency is delaying distribution of the message so that its language can consider some legal points, including the "fairness doctrine."

But the agency "completely and fully" denies that the message had any connection at all with pending deregulation bills, the spokesman said.

The key issue in the dispute is whether there will be a serious gas shortage this winter, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest.

The FEA message—prepared by an unidentified advertising agency—asserts that there will be and that the shortage "can cost thousands of jobs . . . , yours included." Claims to the contrary are "a pack of lies," the message says.

The legislators told Zarb they found it " "hard to believe that you personally approved" the nine-paragraph announcement. The FEA spokesman said Zarb had not seen the text in advance.

The spokesman emphasized that the sole purpose of the message was embodied in the following passage, which the congressmen did not cite in their letters:

"What we do to save gas will save jobs, so please keep thermostates below 68 during the day and 60 at night, seal off all places where heat can escape. Please start saving natural gas now."

In support of their contention that the FEA message is "untrue," the legislators cited recent assessments of the gas outlook by Congress' General Accounting Office and Office of Technology Assessment.

The GAO and OTA said that, barring extremely cold weather, availability of alternative fuels and other factors make it unlikely that the dire warnings of gas shortages by the FEA and Federal Power Commission will be fulfilled.

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