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Ontario ahead of U.S. with control on PCBs

The ban announced by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on the direct discharge of PCBs into waterways only matches controls already in effect in Ontario, says George Kerr, Ontario Environment Minister.

Announced by the EPA on January 19, the ban affects only about 20 plants making electrical transformers and capacitors, in which PCBs are used as insulators.

The U.S. move is the latest step in a worldwide move to eliminate all use of PCBs, once regarded as one of the wonder-chemical families invented by science. PCBs are now implicated in birth defects, cancer, nervous disorders, as well as liver and kidney ailments.

Monsanto Industrial Chemical Co. of St. Louis, the only manufacturer in North America, has announced plans to end production next October 31. Since 1971, Monsanto has sold PCBs for use only in totally closed systems, such as electrical transformers, but the chemicals still escaped to accumulate in aquatic food chains. Some fish from the Great Lakes and other waters have been ruled off the market as a health hazard.

The U.S. ban came on the final day under law for an EPA decision, in response to a legal action by the Environmental Defence Fund, a Washington-based environmental group. Normal appeal procedures could delay its implementation for up to a year.