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Company Limits Use of DDT-Like Chemical

BY ROBERT A. HOVING

WASHINGTON — The sole U.S. manufacturer of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) announced Wednesday that it is taking voluntary action to restrict its use of the material, which government researchers say it may be a major environmental pollutant.

Howard L. Minckler, vice president and general manager of the organic chemicals division of Monsanto Co., St. Louis, Mo., said the company's action has been "completely ignored" in recent political charges and "sensational" newspaper headlines.

"Monsanto has not been pressured by any legislation or organized group," Minckler said. "We have taken decisive action, including laboratory studies, based on evidence that PCB is a persistent chemical which builds up in the environment."

PCB is Problem

Dr. Joseph Linduska, associate director of the U.S. Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife, recently said: "PCB over the long haul may be the greatest problem compound we have. It may be the greatest problem of the chemical age."

PCB molecules are similar to those of DDT, which is acknowledged to be harmful to humans and wildlife.

Many states, including Michigan, have banned DDT. Now researchers wonder if they have been mistaking one chemical for the other, and if their DDT counts in various food samples have been erroneous?

Monsanto to date has declined to reveal to the Commerce Department the number of products containing PCB it sells. However, the company now says it will make a full report after its studies are completed.

"Our program began back in 1968 with the proper identification and measurement of PCB in the environment and will conclude this year by our unilateral action to restrict its use," Minckler said.

Recent reports indicate that PCB causes birth defects in animals. Minckler said in rebuttal: "Monsanto is not aware of any scientific data that includes polychlorinated biphenyls may cause birth defects.

"The results of comprehensive toxicity studies, sponsored by Monsanto and using the usual species of laboratory animals, have failed to produce such effects."

Minckler said "scare tactics and sensational reporting do not serve the public interest nor solve ecological problems." He said that only a few reports have stated why PCB was developed and how it is used in industrial processes. Neither have the consequences of not using PCB been explained, he said.

The chemical was developed more than 40 years ago primarily for a coolant in electrical transformers and capacitors, since it does not conduct electricity.

"Anyone who lives in a large city is familiar with power failures," he said. "During peak power needs, air conditioning and refrigeration fail, lights go out and commuters are stranded. If power companies were to remove PCB from equipment, we have been told that major blackouts would occur throughout the world."

Minckler said PCB is used in electrical equipment as a safety fluid, adding that it has "replaced combustible oil products which have on many occasions exploded and burned, causing deaths and injury to human life."

He said state and local laws throughout the nation require the use of non-flammable fluids in certain electrical equipment.

"At the moment there are no substitutes available which equal the safety performance of PCB," Minckler said.

Monsanto said it intends to continue selling PCB for "closed system" uses, such as electrical components and heat transfer systems.

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