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As We See It

Toxic Substance Controls Vital to Public Protection

THE RECENT contamination of Lake Michigan by the industrial chemical polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) makes the best case possible for enacting a federal Toxic Substances Control Act. The concentration of PCB in lake trout caused the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to begin seizing shipments of Lake Michigan fish.

PCB has a wide variety of industrial uses, including service as hydraulic fluid, heat transfer fluid, electrical transformer insulator, and specialty inks. Traditional effluent standards are meaningless when given such an array of potential pollution source points.

But there's no question of the insidious effect this popular chemical has on the environment into which it's injected. Reproductive failures in northern pike and Lake Michigan salmon, as well as herring gull colonies around Lake Ontario, have been traced to its presence. Children and pregnant women are warned not to eat more than one weekly serving of fish suspected of PCB contamination.

Time and again, as in the case with PCB, new chemicals have been released on the market with no indication of the ultimate harm they could bring. By the time the danger is realized, it may be too late. No one knows what the final effect of PCB will be.

The frustrating outcome so far of toxic substances legislation in Congress has been its passage by both houses twice, in 1972 and 1973, and its death both times in conference committee. This year both houses have completed hearings, but no floor vote has been taken.



Michigan salmon: Victims of PCB

The Senate has been more willing to crack down on poisonous products than the House, voting to require pre-market testing of new compounds according to Environmental Protection Agency guidelines, and the screening of substances already in circulation. Sen. Philip Hart, D-Mich., again is a co-sponsor of tough legislation, in his S. 776.

Among this year's lineup of House bills, HR 7548, introduced by Rep. William Brodhead, D-Mich., stands out. The Detroit congressman, unlike House sponsors of other toxic control bills, would require manufacturers to notify the EPA of their intent to produce any new chemical substance.

The EPA would be required to restrict the manufacture of any substances posing an "unreasonable risk." These would include products found to induce cancer in man or animals, birth defects or gene mutations, or any irreversible or serious pathology.

The deadly gap in environmental laws on toxic substances was spotlighted by the federal Council on Environmental Quality in a 1971 report. The council noted the existence of some 1.8 million chemical compounds, with 350,000 more being developed each year, and upwards of 300 entering commercial channels yearly.

Because the health risks of these new products often are unclear, the consumer is left to be the guinea pig for the $70-billion-a-year chemical industry.

PCB, as we have noted, is a perfect example. In the Michigan Legislature, Rep. David Bonior, D-Mount Clemens, is sponsoring a bill that would deal with this substance at the state level by banning it from use.

The Bonior bill's swift enactment would be a logical complement to similar treatment of the Toxic Substances Control Act by Congress. The latter becomes even more important when its value is weighed in terms of what it could do to prevent future PCBs from emerging.

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