Wisconsin

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 75-182

WASHINGTON, D.C., DEC. 19 - Legislation that would severely limit then ultimately ban use of chemical PCBs - polychlorinated biphenyls that have been found to cause severe skin and liver conditions, birth defects and other illness - has been introduced by Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.).

Nelson said in a statement that rapidly accumulating evidence suggests that PCBs may turn out to be the most serious environmental health problem yet encountered.

"We can no longer afford to wait and debate the risks versus the commercial benefits," said Nelson, who introduced the original legislation that ultimately resulted in a general ban on DDT.

"As in the case of DDT, it is apparent that the risks to human health and the environment far exceed the benefits," Nelson said. Furthermore, he said, alternatives to commercial use of the substances are being developed.

PCBs are widely used in such varied products as capacitators, piping, furnaces, carbonless paper, copying inks, and recycled paper.

Nelson said his legislation - an amendment of the Toxic Substances Act - would ban all use of PCBs in non-enclosed situations immediately and all enclosed situations within a year if there are viable and safe alternatives.

Some of the non-enclosed uses that would be banned are use in carbonless paper, paints, coatings, soaps, and copying ink toners.

The goal, Nelson said, is to eventually eliminate the use of PCBs. "It is preferable not to enact legislation on the substance-by-substance basis," Nelson said. "However the PCB problem shows no sign of abating and it has become so severe that it is necessary to address the problem head on, as we were forced to do with DDT."

Nelson quoted Nathaniel Reed, assistant secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, as saying that PCBs contaminate food and water supplies, threatening health and posing "'environmental stress' about which we know comparatively little."

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Add One - PCBs

At least 10 million pounds of PCBs are lost into the environment each year through vaporization, leaks, and spills, according to estimates reported by Thomas E. Kopp, a chemist with the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Toxic Substances.

At least 10 plants are dumping PCBs into U.S. waterways and another two are discharging the chemicals in municipal sewage treatment systems, according to the EPA.

PCBs have been found to be far more resistant than DDT to degradation by natural forces. Thus, they are building up in concentration in the environment, wildlife, and human tissues, Nelson explained.

PCBs have been found, in scientific tests, to cause severe skin and liver problems in humans.

University of Wisconsin Medical School researchers, Dr. James R. Allen and Deborah Barsotti, have demonstrated that very low PCB levels are dangerous to primates, causing facial swelling, loss of hair, acne lesions within one month, birth defects, miscarriages, still births, and death.

Other research shows similar problems with fish and wildlife, such as reproductive failure identified in herring gull colonies around Lake Ontario.

The Food and Drug Administration admits that PCBs have infiltrated food, milk, water, and meat, to the extent that the FDA has been forced to set tolerance levels of allowable amounts of PCBs in the food supply, Nelson said.

"Despite efforts to voluntarily limit the commercial use of PCBs to closed systems and to reduce U.S. production, the pollution has not been reduced," Nelson said. This is due in part to their indestructibility; to the fact that U.S. users of PCBs are obtaining supplies from foreign producers for non-enclosed uses, such as in hand soaps, copying-ink toners, and other products; and to the fact that PCBs still are being spilled or leaked, either accidentally or directly, into the environment."

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