Monsanto announces end to production of PCBs

ST. LOUIS — Monsanto Company recently announced that it will shut down its polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) manufacturing unit, complete distribution of all inventories and withdraw completely from the market as the principal supplier of PCB dielectric insulating fluids to the electrical power supply industry by no later than Oct. 31, 1977.

The firm withdrawal date was announced by Earle H. Harbison, Jr., general manager of Monsanto's Specialty Chemicals Division. Harbison said the company would have targeted an even earlier shutdown date had transformer and capacitor manufacturers' conversion timetables permitted. Monsanto's PCB products are produced solely for use as dielectric insulating fluids at the company's William G. Krummrich plant, located just south of East St. Louis.

According to Harbison, PCBs are a group of synthetic chlorinated organic compounds, commercially produced for the first time in 1929 in response to the electrical industry's need for improved dielectric insulating fluids which would also provide increased fire resistance benefits in transformer and capacitor applications.

"Fire resistant, PCB-filled transformers are used in certain indoor installations such as high rise buildings, hospitals and schools, and in electrically-powered urban commuter trains. Their function is to either increase or reduce voltage or change the current in the system. PCB-containing capcitors are used to control voltage and reduce power losses in fluorescent and mercury lights, AC motors, air conditioning compressors and television receivers," he said.

In describing the magnitude of the problems associated with reaching a firm exit date, Harbison explained that the fire resistant and dielectric characteristics of PCBs have for the past 45 years made them not only the standard but, in many cases, the only fluids approved for these dielectric applications.

He pointed out that fire, insurance, building and electrical codes and regulations in many parts of the country have traditionally required their use in high density population applications where violent failure of a device containing a flammable fluid could result in a fire or explosion of catastrophic proportions.

Harbison emphasized that fire resistant PCB-filled capacitors not only fail infrequently but also fail safely.

"Unfortunately, the very properties that have made PCBs ideal and even mandatory for these essential uses, were also found in the early 1970s, more than 40 years after they were first introduced, to be the properties causing them to persist and accumulate in the environment.

Because of this tendency to resist biodegradation, Monsanto announced last January its decision to voluntarily cease production as soon as the electrical industry could find viable alternate fluids and convert its equipment and components to their use."

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