EPA lists 12 plants as sources of toxic PCB pollution

By Bruce Ingersoll

For the first time, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday singled out the 12 industrial dischargers of PCBs into the nation's waters and sketched how enormous the entire PCB problem has become.

PCBs — shorthand for polychlorinated biphenyls — make up a group of highly toxic chemicals. Many government officials and researchers here and abroad regard them as a potential health threat and as an ecological villain comparable to DDT.

Despite restrictions on the U.S. manufacture of PCBs, an estimated 10 million pounds a year are escaping into the environment, Thomas E. Kopp, an EPA chemical engineer, disclosed here at a national conference on PCBs.

Industry has made wide use of PCBs since 1929, but nobody recognized them as a major environmental threat until 1966. In 1972, Monsanto Corp., the sole U.S. producer of PCBs, began limiting its sales to the manufacturers of electrical transformers and capacitors. (PCBs, being fire-resistant, are important to electrical safety.) Elsewhere, Japan banned PCBs outright and other industrialized nations limited their use to "closed electrical systems."

These measures, however, did not suffice, Train told 500 public officials, industrial chemists and scientists who came from Japan, Canada, Europe and all over the U.S. to attend the three-day conference in the Pick-Congress Hotel.

"Three years later, we find that, while PCB levels in food have steadily declined, PCBs are present in our environment to a far greater extend and at higher levels than before," Train said.

High PCB levels have been found in salmon, striped bass and other fish taken from the Great Lakes, the upper Mississippi River, the Hudson River, the Gulf of Mexico and southern California waters, he said.

Moreover, Train added, low concentrations of PCBs have been detected in the drinking water of Winnebago, Ill.; Sellersburg, Ind.; Bridgeport, Conn.; New Bedford, Mass., and Escondido, Calif. So far, no health standard has been set for PCBs in tap water.

Train's aide Kopp said that the EPA has begun the "detective work" to track down all the sources of PCB pollution. "The number of people who are sending used PCBs to waste-disposal companies is unreal," he said in an interview. "Where do they get them? We really don't know yet."

EPA officials have identified 12 industrial sources, 11 of which are manufacturers of either transformers or capacitors. The discharges from these sources range from a few ounces of PCBs a day to 116 pounds, he said.

Kopp said that General Electric is dumping PCBs from four plants at Pittsfield, Mass.; Fort Edward, N.Y.; Hudson Falls, N.Y., and Rome, Ga. Westinghouse Corp. is descharging PCBs from its plants at Sharon, Pa., and Bloomington, Ind. The other sources are Aerovox Industries Inc. and Cornell-Dubilier Electric Corp., both in New Bedford, Mass.; Sangamon Electric Co. in Pickens, S.C., and Universal Manufacturing Corp. in Totowa, N.J.

Monsanto's PCB-manufacturing plant at Sauget, Ill., near East St. Louis, and Universal Manufacturing's capacitor plant at Bridgeport, Conn., send their PCB discharges to municipal treatment plants, Kopp said.

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