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Safety last?

Testing would reveal dangerous chemicals early

times editorial

If vinyl chloride were the only man-made substance suspected of causing cancer and other diseases, then Congress might have an excuse for failing to enact a strong toxic substances control law.

Hardly a week passes, however, without new evidence turning up that we are poisoning our environment and ourselves with synthetic chemicals. Invariably, very little is known about these substances until, as in the vinyl chloride case, they have done their damage.

It was entirely appropriate, therefore, that Russell Train, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, should use his recent announcement of vinyl chloride emissions standards as an occasion for urging Congress to require pre-market testing of new chemicals.

The idea is to find out whether a substance is dangerous to man or the environment before factory workers, consumers, fish and wildlife are exposed to it. Laboratory animals rather than people would be used to test a product's safety.

Congress is not unsympathetic to this viewpoint. Both houses passed toxic-substances bills last year, but couldn't reconcile their differences.

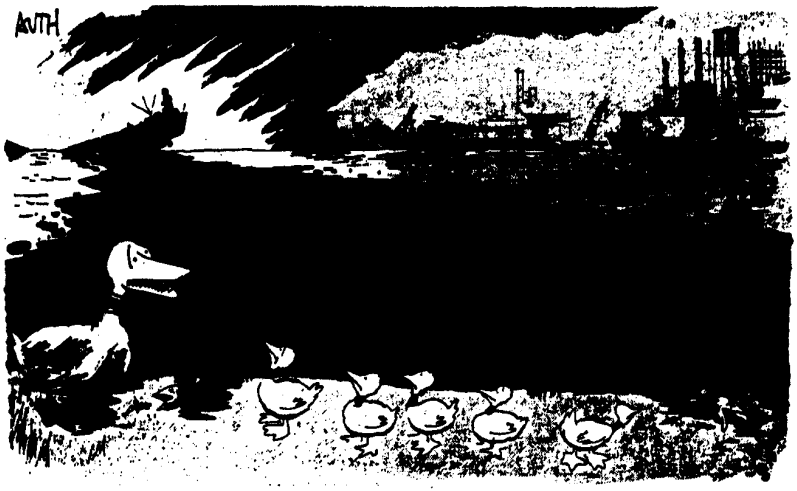
Several bills have been introduced again this year, but enough congressmen seem to have been cowed by chemical-industry lobbyists to make passage unlikely. In his anti-regulation mood, President Ford would probably veto any bill that is passed.

If Congress and the White House are waiting for a dramatic illustration of the need for controls, they need look no farther than their own backyard.

Gov. Mills Godwin of Virginia was forced last week to close a 100-mile stretch of the James River to fishermen because a chemical plant had contaminated it with a pesticide called Kepone.

Although Kepone is believed to be highly toxic to humans, the state's water pollution control agency had no idea how dangerous the stuff was

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Auth in The Philadelphia Enquirer

'Don't go near the water!'

when it turned up in a municipal sewage system.

Chemicals known as PCBs continue to be widely used by the electrical equipment industry even though they have been known for years to be a cause of skin disease and liver problems and may be harmful to the environment in other ways.

The manufacturers insist there is no adequate substitute. Although the production of PCBs has been limited to some degree, the EPA has found them to be widespread throughout the environment, in part because they are even more persistent than DDT.

We would have obviously saved ourselves a great deal of misery and expense if we had known in advance how these chemicals might behave and what risks were involved in allowing their manufacture.

The chemical industry naturally claims that the cost of systematic safety testing will be high, as it no doubt will be. But we will ultimately pay far more for health care, pollution control and a contaminated environment if Congress doesn't soon become aware of the results of its inaction.

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