PCB Detoxicant Unveiled; No Panacea, Some Contend

By Jon Sawyer
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WASHINGTON — A new chemical process designed to destroy the toxic nature of PCBs is no panacea and will have only limited application, say officials of the St. Louis-based Monsanto Co.

The firm was the prime manufacturer of PCBs before production was barred in 1979.

The process in question was developed by Sunohio, an Ohio subsidiary of Sun Co. and the Ohio Transformer Corp. It was disclosed Tuesday with considerable fanfare at the headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency.

William B. Clark, acting assistant administrator for pesticides and toxic substances, hailed the new process, saying that it "could be of significant value in solving the nationwide PCB problem."

Sunohio officials went further. A promotional film developed by the company noted the presence of at least 300 million pounds of long-lived PCBs, (polychlorinated biphenyls) in the American environment and the shortcomings of past efforts to dispose of the substance.

"[In view this] dilemma is solved," the film's narration, [illegible] Sunohio's process — called [illegible] — will go a long way [illegible]

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St. Louis Post-Dispatch
May 27, 1981

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board eradicating the public health hazard posed by the PCBs. They were used widely as coolants in electrical transformers and capacitors.

The result that PCBs can be eradicated by the new process is "totally incorrect," says John H. Craddock, project and environmental safety director for Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co.

Monsanto was challenging domestic manufacturers of PCBs between 1975 and 1977, when it discontinued production [illegible] offering evidence linking PCBs to reproductive failures, birth defects, tumors and other [illegible] that Monsanto has believed [illegible] the public for safe disposal methods.

"The point remains the PCB test there now will [illegible] there, even with this new process," Craddock said. In subsequent interviews, officials at both Sunohio and the EPA conceded that Craddock was right.

The fine print of the EPA's announcement Tuesday was that Sunohio has certified its process for [illegible] just one of the EPA's criteria — one of which, called [illegible] — and only on a type of transformer that contains mineral oil.

Clark sought to play down the limitations of the process, noting that more than 80 percent of the nation's transformers are of the mineral oil variety.

But such transformers contain only trace amounts of PCBs, rarely in quantity of 500 parts of PCBs for each million parts of oil.

The EPA's own estimates, made available later Tuesday, indicate that about 20 million mineral-oil transformers contain about 60,000 pounds of PCBs. This is the target pool for the Sunohio process.

But the Sunohio process has not been approved for use on about 140,000 transformers that contain PCB concentrations of 40 or 50 percent — about 300 million pounds in total. Nor does it have any application for the 400 million pounds of PCB solids in electrical capacitors.

David Gibson, marketing director for Sunohio, confirmed in a telephone interview Tuesday the limited initial application of the process. But he stressed that the company is poised for a much larger penetration of the clean-up market.

"You always start slow, work your way into something like this," he said. He said Sunohio has demonstrated its ability to handle pure PCBs and plans to take on the entire PCB transformer market in the near future.

Otis D. Jordan, co-inventor of the process and a consulting chief president, also pointed to the demonstration last October as proof that no technical problem had risen in the process on pure PCBs.

The issue, he said, is purely economic: whether the public will demand alternatives to incinerators for PCB disposal.

In talking those with Craddock's criticism, Jordan said, "Monsanto's opinion on this is like asking Jimmy Carter's opinion of Ronald Reagan. They created this problem in the first place, and I haven't seen where they've done anything about it."

EPA officials were less-complete when questioned later.

William Gunter, an official of the agency's toxic assessment branch, noted that Sunohio's present equipment — put up in a transshipper trailer for easy transportation — could not handle the large volumes of PCB waste that many [illegible] incinerators of high-concentration PCBs.

As for the Sunohio officials' contention that their process will be competitive with those of the two incinerator sites licensed to burn PCB-contaminated wastes, Gunter said, "I think they're optimistic."

But in general, EPA officials defend the Sunohio project, as a promising element in the overall campaign to eradicate PCBs. Even if the process does not more than treat low-concentration mineral oils, Gunter noted, it will ease the present burden on the incinerators and EPA-approved landfills.

Gunter also said that he saw nothing unusual in the EPA's supplying a highly visible forum for a private company to tout a new product.