State seeks PCB ban

By ROGER McBAIN
of the Cardinal Staff

State legislation which could make it a crime to switch on a television set or use an electric oven sparked more than four hours of debate Friday, in a crowded public hearing at the State Capitol.

Representatives of industry, utilities, environmental groups and governmental agencies testified before the Assembly Environmental Quality Committee on Assembly Bill 1342, which would ban the production, sale, purchase and use of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in Wisconsin after Feb. 1, 1977.

OPPOSITION TO the bill came from electrical and paper industries as well as the Wisconsin Electric Power Co. While agreeing that PCBs are a health hazard, and should be removed when acceptable substitutes become available, the bill's opponents complained that the absolute ban of PCBs use was too broad.

"If this bill is passed," warned Electrical Industries Assn. representative N. Ray Clark, "if you turn on the fluorescent lights in your office or use your TV set... you will be in violation of the law."

The toxic PCBs are still widely used in electrical components for items such as television receivers, fluorescent lighting fixtures and refrigerators. In many cases no acceptable substitutes for the toxin have yet been developed.

Although a clause in the bill would allow for the State Department of Natural Resources to make specific exceptions to the ban, Clark said that the process of deciding upon the exceptions "would be a technical nightmare and a practical impossibility."

THE BILL'S AUTHOR, Rep. Mary Lou Munts, D-Madison, who chairs the Environmental Quality Committee, urged speedy action on the proposed legislation, citing the growing danger of PCB contamination of humans and the environment, and noting the financial threat to the commercial fishing industry.

Fish taken from Lake Michigan have contained amounts of PCBs exceeding the five parts per million established by the Food and Drug Administration as the maximum acceptable level.

Dr. James R. Allen, University professor of pathology, told the committee that rhesus monkeys that had been fed a constant diet containing five parts per million of PCBs displayed "classical symptoms of PCB contamination" after just four months. The symptoms included skin rashes, puffy eylids accompanied by loss of eyelashes and a significantly increased infant mortality rate.

The effects of the chemical on humans gained worldwide attention after an outbreak of PCB poisoning in Japan in 1968. The source of the contamination was rice oil containing PCBs.

While conceding that "some further detail" is needed in her bill, Munts stated emphatically, "I'd like to see executive action on this in a very short time."



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