BRIAN WIDLAKE:

For years now scientists and doctors have worried about the effects of toxic chemicals on the environment and on human beings. Now the Americans are taking steps to ban their use. Congress has just voted to prohibit poly-chlorinated-Biphelyls or P.C.B.s as they're known, from 1978. Geoffrey Blythe has been telling me about it.

GEOFFREY BLYTHE:

P.C.B.s are a very common form of chemical used a lot in the plastics industry and for a long time doctors have been saying that they're very hazardous. In fact in the debate in the House over the ban one Congressman referred to P.C.B.s as dangerous as a mad dog and he said it was time to get rid of it. It's a view with which many scientists here agree; for a long time they've been saying that P.C.B.s are one of the main causes of cancer and also probably one of the causes of birth defects in babies.

B.W.:

How widespread is their use in the American chemical industry?

G.B.:

Well very widespread. It's used for all sorts of things, for example, it's used a lot in the electrical industry for insulation, it's a very good fire proofing material apparently, it's also used, for example, in carbon with copy paper. Actually P.C.B.s are probably quite safe in normal use, it's when the chemical is burned, for example, when old electrical equipment is destroyed or burned, that's when it really becomes dangerous. The chemical gets into the atmosphere or into the ground, it gets washed into rivers and that's when the trouble starts. Already there are rivers here such as the Hudson River so polluted now with these chemicals that all fishing has stopped, it's been officially banned in fact. There's one astonishing figure that came out the other day, one official, a Government chemist, estimated that something like 10,000 tons of these toxic chemicals get into the environment every year, through vapourisation, leaks, spills, things like that and some of the P.C.B.s he claims, actually get into peoples drinking water.

B.W.:

Well, the authorities may talk about cancer and other toxic effects on human beings, but have they managed to prove quite conclusively that they are bad for human beings?

G.B.:

Oh yes, because scientists do claim that they have definite proof that they do cause things like deformities in children, also that they cause liver cancer, these are things they're very sure about, they say; also that it causes some form of skin disease. Actually, only the other day, doctors in Michigan found traces of the chemical in the breast milk of more than 30 mothers

MONS 036616

and the theory is that it got there because the women may have eaten meat or fish or even vegetables that had been contaminated by the chemical. Trouble is though, the doctors don't know whether they should advise the women to stop breast feeding their babies altogether or not. For safety's sake, most women have decided to stop, but it could already be too late; but what really worries the scientists most is that these P.C.B.s are non-biodegradable, that is the chemical doesn't disintegrate, it continues virtually for ever. In fact one scientist said today that this ban by Washington may be too late; even if all manufacturers stopped today, he said, and not two years from now, it would still be 100, maybe 200 years, before P.C.B.s are cleared out of the environment altogether.

B.W.:

Geoffrey, what about other toxic chemicals? Are they likely to come under the same kind of scrutiny now?

G.B.:

Well, they'll come under the same kind of scrutiny but of course if they can be banned is another story. The chemical industry, needless to say, is not very happy, in fact they're certain to try and persuade President Ford that he shouldn't sign the Bill, that he should veto it, but I think if they do it'll cause quite an outcry here, that's if people are concerned enough. I do know the scientists and doctors are concerned, in fact the National Cancer Institute is now saying that 60% of the cancer cases in America, maybe as many as 90%, are caused by what they call environmental contaminates, that is chemicals like these P.C.B.s. And the other day someone estimated there are now 30,000 chemicals in use today and 1000 new ones come on the market every year. As one of those Congressmen who voted on this new ban said in the House yesterday, it may already be too late to repair the damage.

B.W.:

Geoffrey Blythe.

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