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John R. Quarles Jr.

EPA official forecasts ban on PCB use

By Kirk Scharfenberg

BOSTON — The deputy administrator of the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said yesterday that it is "likely" that Congress this year will pass legislation that for the first time would enable the government to control, and even ban, the use of industrial chemicals, such as the PCB used by General Electric here.

However, John R. Quarles Jr., the number two man in the EPA, said if the legislation is too restrictive, if it requires pretesting for health effects of all new industrial chemicals, it will probably be vetoed by President Ford.

At a press conference at EPA regional headquarters here, a session that is part of a concentrated EPA effort to secure passage of a Toxic Substances Act this year, Quarles declared that despite mounting evidence of the harmful effects of industrial chemicals in the environment, "as a country we are doing very little about analyzing them and controlling their use."

The proposed Toxic Substances Act, now pending in both the House and Senate Commerce committees, would authorize the EPA to require chemical manufacturers to carry out tests on the health effects of chemicals, would require reports from the manufacturers on the quantity and intended use of the chemicals they produce and would allow the EPA to limit or ban outright the use of chemicals deemed harmful.

The key question, according to Quarles, is whether the legislation will require all new chemicals slated for commercial production to be tested. Both Ford and the EPA want the bill to give the agency discretion on what chemicals are subject to the testing requirement. Quarles said most drafts of bills pending in Congress mandate testing of all new commercially produced chemicals.

Quarles, a Wellesley native who has been deputy director of administration of EPA for 2½ years, said the agency believes it would have enough work to do just to monitor tests on chemicals already on the market and those new chemicals which appear to pose a health hazard.

According to Quarles, about 30,000 chemicals, most of them used in industrial processes, are now on the market, and about 1,000 new ones are added to that list annually. At present, the federal government has direct control only over chemical additives in food and pesticides.

"It's scary," Quarles said, citing the growing evidence that chemicals in the environment are a leading cause of cancer, the failure of reproductive systems and nervous system disorders. "We know very little about what specific chemicals expose us to risks...The fundamental fact is our ignorance."

Quarles defended the system proposed in the pending Toxic Substances Act that would have manufacturers, rather than the government itself, test for health risks. At present, he said, the government does not have the expertise to make the tests. He noted that it was only in recent years that instrumentation was even developed to measure the presence of many chemical substances.

Specifically on the subject of PCB, John A.G. McGlennon, the regional director of the EPA who accompanied Quarles at yesterday's press conference, said he doubted that the EPA had the technical capacity to make the necessary tests for substitutes.

The principal question blocking the use of a substitute for PCB — which is used by electrical equipment manufacturers as an insulating fluid — is that no substitute has been developed that is as resistant to fire as PCB. Electrical equipment manufacturers such as GE — which uses PCB in the fluid it calls Pyranol — maintain therefore that they must continue to use PCB in electrical equipment slated for use in congested areas in order to reduce the risk of fire.

PCB has been found to cause failure in the reproductive system of fish, to cause cancer in laboratory animals and to cause deforming skin diseases in humans. Fish taken from the Housatonic River have been found to contain concentrations of PCB seven times the health standard set by the Food and Drug Administration.

The EPA has been attempting to convince both the Monsanto Chemical Co., the only domestic producer of PCB, and the electrical equipment manufacturers to abandon PCB on a voluntary basis. They have all agreed to do so — once an acceptable substitute is found.

It was concern over PCB — particularly the heavy concentrations that have been found in fish in the Hudson River — and Kepone, a pesticide that has been blamed for 20 serious illnesses among workers at a West Virginia processing plant, that has revved the push for a Toxic Substances Act.

Such legislation was first proposed to Congress in 1971. In 1973 different versions passed both the House and Senate, but the measure died when the two could not agree on the extent of pretesting that would be required.

Quarles' call here yesterday for passage of legislation this year followed by a day similar statements from EPA Administrator Russell E. Train in a speech at the National Press Club in Washington. "We can no longer afford to wait for the basic authority to deal effectively with the problems of chemical pollution," he said.

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