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Another suspect

PCBs linked to birth defects and deaths

PCBs, another chemical used for decades as a fire and heat retardant, is another suspected carcinogen.

When, in 1979, some PCBs were dumped along 240 miles of highway in North Carolina, including a stretch in Alamance County, the forces of the state went into a quandary over what to do.

Nothing, ultimately, was done. The dumpers were tried and found guilty in Raleigh.

But the relatively small amounts of PCBs dumped did not compare at all with the huge amounts of PCBs that line riverbed bottoms throughout the state and the Southeast.

A research chemist told The Times-News "it is almost certain" the PCBs cost the river bottoms, accruing from years of runoff, and from the transformer oil dumped on roads in summer to keep the dust down. The transformer oil contained PCBs to help insulate against excessive heat.

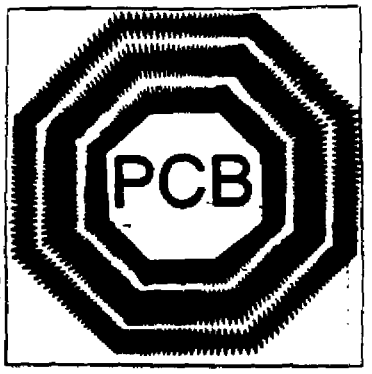
But no one in the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or concerned state agencies had any notion whether the widely-used substance existed on river bottoms.

LINKED TO BIRTH DEFECTS

PCB is a suspected carcinogen in humans and has been linked to birth defects, miscarriages and several deaths during its 51-year history.

Like mercury, PCB is a substance that can build up to toxic levels in the human body. The most common method of PCB ingestion is by eating fish. But Hobart Souther, a research chemist and water specialist, contended that humans "won't get enough" to harm them via this route.

According to Souther, it takes approximately 2



ounces of PCB to kill a 100-pound person.

Problems can also develop from the contact of PCBs with a person's skin. Scientists have linked PCBs with a condition known as chloracne, a disease involving skin eruptions.

Chris West, director of the Public Awareness Office of Raleigh's EPA branch, said he was unsure whether North Carolina environmental officials monitored PCB levels in the rivers, but added, "I think that's an accurate statement though, that PCBs are there."

Despite the federal ban on the manufacture of PCB, the substance is still used in the manufacture of items such as capacitators, due to an exemption in the law permitting its use in "closed conditions."

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are a family of suspected cancer-causing chemicals that are known to cause skin diseases and have been linked to birth defects. Introduced by the Monsanto chemical company in 1929, PCBs quickly became the preferred coolant for electrical equipment because they don't conduct electricity, they remain stable, and they don't burn even at high temperatures. PCBs came to be used in 30 to 40 percent of the capacitors — devices mounted atop utility poles throughout the nation to regulate voltage — manufactured in the United States.

From 1932 to 1977 they were used in transformers mounted on roofs, inside buildings or buried in urban areas. PCBs can also be found in capacitor banks under electric trains and in mining equipment, natural-gas pipeline compressors, electromagnets, paint pigments, carbonless copy paper — even in television sets, air conditioners, microwave ovens and the fluorescent light fixtures that may be in your home.

Ironically, it was the toxic PCBs that were the preferred insulating fluid for use in electrical equipment placed in more populated areas, while nontoxic mineral-oil insulating fluid, the other widely used dielectric, was used primarily in remote areas. No one recognized the dangers of PCBs; manufacturers and utilities were more afraid of insulating with mineral oil, which they knew might cause fire or explode.

The first fatality reportedly traced to PCBs was reported in 1997. The victim had just developed chloracne, followed by jaundice, according to a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health study. He was hospitalized afterward with abdominal pain and distension. At autopsy, cirrhosis of the liver with "superimposed acute yellow atrophy was found," says the study. He had been exposed to low concentrations of PCBs while manufacturing them.

In 1968, an estimated 1,000 residents of Yusho, Japan, ate rice oil accidentally contaminated by PCBs. Within five years, five of those people died of liver cancer — six times the normal death rate. Others who had eaten the oil came down with severe cases of chloracne; there were also reports of stillbirths and miscarriages among the group. Japan immediately banned all trade in the chemical.

PCBs move through the environment. Since they behave like fats, which don't readily dissolve in water, they tend to separate from water and cling to the surfaces of solids, sediments and airborne and waterborne particles. Then the PCBs move through the ecosystem with the particles to which they are attached and get taken up by living organisms either through ingestion or absorption directly through the skin or surface. It is reported that for as long as a living organism is exposed to PCBs, the chemical will continue to increase in concentration within that organism.

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Let Peace Begin With Me

[illegible]

David Rutledge
PUBLISHER

Ed Book
EDITOR

(USPS 146-[illegible])



Not names...

...But the costs, and games need airing out

Public Fo

The press should never try to damage the good name of anybody. But it cannot do its job sometimes, without hurting, in some measure, someone.

Sometimes, it's obvious. In a murder, for example, a newspaper may report the initial crime, the arrest, and then the court proceeding. When guilt is established, few people have much compassion for the murderer. But the newspaper cannot name him or her without hurting perhaps a mother somewhere, or an elderly aunt, who may be pained to see their [illegible] in such straits.

But that does not mean the truth of what has been reported should rather have been censored in some way.

A letter on this page today raises some points about a shoplifting case that received more than usual coverage. It received the coverage because it was dismissed quietly, without the knowledge of the complaining merchant, or the arresting officer.

We cannot see how a case can be dismissed when the litigants and key participants are not heard.

We are not attacking the defendant in the case at all. In fact, as bare mention as possible was made to identify the person, because who it was was incidental to "what was" going on.

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