

PCB's feared peril to humans

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Any chance of harvesting fish for commercial marketing is also ruled out, which prompted a spokesman for the seafood industry to demand an immediate ban on the chemical compound.

PCB's invaded the environment through direct discharge from industrial users — now banned — or through the breakdown of waste materials in products in which they are used.

Introduced about 1930, the chemical has been used mainly as cooling fluid in electrical transformers and other equipment, as heat-transfer fluids, and as hydraulic oil. It also is in plastic products, paint, printing inks, hand soap and carbonless "carbon" paper.

Once in the environment, PCBs persist and are absorbed by tiny organisms on which fish feed, thus entering the food chain, and finally reaching humans where they lodge mostly in body fats.

"We are in trouble," said Nathaniel Reed, an expert on fish and wildlife, in discussing the high PCB levels found in fish. "I think the fish are trying to tell us something."

Treatment of PCBs is dif-

ficult. Monsanto, the nation's lone producer of the chemical in St. Louis, uses a special incinerator.

But the chemical still gets into waterways — and even the soil — where the contamination persists.

Michigan officials have urged a national ban on domestic and imported PCBs, except in closed electrical systems such as transformers. However, they still worry even there about mishaps which may release the chemical.

Dow Chemical and other firms did report encouraging results in developing PCB substitutes.

But the progress is slow and industry warns the changeover could easily cost \$500 million a year, which would be passed on to consumers.

Also, they claim fire insurance rates would skyrocket, since substitutes aren't as safe as PCB's in electrical systems.

Critics, however, argue that the voluntary program to curb use launched by industry in 1972 hasn't worked — and that PCB contamination, if anything, is getting worse.

The Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, not only wants the use of PCB's phased out completely — even in closed

electrical system — but advocates the tolerance level in fish set by the FDA be reduced, a move made recently by Canadian authorities to protect fish consumers.

Similar proposals are pending before the Michigan Legislature, and special interstate committees overseeing pollution problems of the Great Lakes have urged tighter controls.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) came under heavy fire during the conference for "foot dragging" in taking corrective steps in stopping PCB discharges, and cleaning up residues.

EPA spokesman, however, say they lack sufficient personnel, funding and research and that there are pressing other pollution problems to deal with.

The agency argues also that it needs more effective enforcement powers from Congress.

But Reed, who is an assistant Secretary of the Interior, admonished the EPA for not doing enough:

"Quite frankly, I am thoroughly disgusted by the gnashing of teeth, wailing and rubbing of hands (here).

"To the agencies which have the enforcement responsibilities, a word on behalf of the bewildered but concerned

American people — get on with it (the job)."

The conference adjourned, however, without coming up with any instant solution to the PCB problem or corrective steps.

"We don't have them (easy solution) either," admitted one bewildered EPA researcher.

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PCB's feared as a threat to humans

Chemical poisoning Great Lakes fish

By JAMES L. KIRBY
Times Staff Writer

CHICAGO — Scientists and research reports about fish are baffled and frustrated in controlling the latest environmental poison — a group of industrial chemicals called PCB's.

Presented as a "inert" material in powering first in electrical transformers and insulators, the compound — polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) — is suspected of contaminating the food of humans by poisoning the aquatic food chain.

It's the latest ecological villain — so insidious, environmentalists claim, that it should be banned immediately from further use.

Industry already has curbed use of PCB's. But some scientists, alarmed over the amounts of its residues found in fish in the Great Lakes, are concerned about the chemical's persistence and widespread contamination.

"It's not only plaguing the Great Lakes, but every river, stream and waterway in the

world," said one researcher at a three-day symposium on the problem last month in Chicago.

Experts had hoped levels of the potent pollutant — mostly absorbed by fish and other aquatic life — would decline sharply when industry voluntarily agreed to limit the use of PCB's in 1972.

They had been encouraged by a similar ban on DDT in 1959, which resulted in reduced DDT levels in the fatty tissue of fish tested recently from Lake Michigan.

But that hasn't happened with PCB's.

Instead, the level of PCB's continues to hang on to threaten a first class nuisance — and threat to human life.

What fisheries researchers fear is that they not only have failed to stop the chemical from con-

tinuing to get into the aquatic food chain, but they have trouble safely disposing of PCB's.

For instance:

Michigan officials say they don't know what to do with 100 cubic yards of oil contaminated when a Shell Midcon facility in Marquette.

The oil poses a disposal problem because it could pollute or poison underground water supplies. Monitoring wells are being drilled to check ground water.

Similarly, when a transformer broke and saturated a section of a roof on an industrial plant in Detroit with PCB fluid, officials had another problem.

The roof was cut away, but burning was banned because particles of the chemical would escape and contaminate waterways.

"I imagine every one of us is carrying some PCB in our body tissues," a speaker told the 500 experts who gathered for the Chicago conference.

The chief concern is the health threat to humans, and possible irreversible contamination of the environment since the PCB family of chemical compounds are virtually indestructible.

Japan banned use of PCB's after more than 1,200 people suffered a disturbing skin disease which was traced to rice oil contaminated with the chemical.

But PCB's — like almost any contaminant — also are suspected of causing cancer when it is injected into laboratory rats with liver cancer.

Also, experiments at the University of Wis-

consin show various chemicals passing through rats treated with PCB's. In fact, fed fish lined with PCB residues, have failed to reproduce.

Researchers at the Chicago conference reported all other nations and lake trout from Lake Michigan tested in 1974 for PCB content were found "unsafe for human consumption."

In addition, 70 to 80 percent of Lake Michigan chubs also exceeded the 1 part per million parts (ppm) limit set by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a health check.

PCB contamination, the conference was told, was undermining a \$175 million program to restock the Great Lakes with prize species such as trout, salmon and other game fish.

The chemical was making them unable to eat, and lake trout have been unable to reproduce, and government agencies reported.

Spectators have been warned not to consume the fish they catch more than once a week for fear of ingesting dangerous levels of PCB's.

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