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Madison Chemist Questions Analysis

Is DDT Taking The Rap For Another Compound?

By WHITNEY GOULD
(Of The Capital Times Staff)

The possibility that DDT residues found in fish may have been confused with those of another compound was raised here Tuesday by a Madison chemist, at the state Department of Natural Resources' hearings on a petition to ban continued use of DDT in Wisconsin.

The witness was Francis B. Coon, head of the chemistry department at the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation Institute, Inc. Coon was also on the stand today for cross-examination, as the chemical industry continued its defense of the controversial pesticide.

The thrust of his testimony was that "polychlorianted biphenyls"—or PCB's—plasticizing compounds used in paints, tires, lipsticks and other products, behave in initial pesticide residue analyses much like DDT and its breakdown products.

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Coon said that WARF had analyzed last fall a coho salmon taken from Lake Michigan near Bear Creek, at the request of the National Agricultural Chemicals Association, which is financing DDT's defense here.

On first analysis the fish contained 14 to 15 parts-per-million of DDT and two of its metabolites, DDD and DDE, he said. But under further analysis, "we had indications that part of the DDD and DDT was indeed PCB's." (Total of the two known pesticide residues was then reduced from 5.13 ppm to 1.61 ppm. The remaining 9.64 ppm, identified as DDE, is still under analysis, he said.)

Coon said his division had done up to 30,000 pesticide residue analyses on fish and wildlife, and first became aware of the role of PCB's in 1967, when the compounds were identified as possible interferences by Swedish and British scientists.

"We found evidence," he said, "that PCB's were undoubtedly present in some of our analyses."

The chemist's testimony came under sharp attack this morning, however, under cross-examination by Victor J. Yannacone, New York attorney for the conservation groups who have petitioned for a ban on the pesticide in Wisconsin.

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The bone of contention was a long sheet of paper with wavy lines—product of a "gas chromatograph," the instrument used to analyze pesticide residues. The pesticides produce peaks and valleys on the paper (a chromatogram), in somewhat the manner that a seismograph leaves earthquake tracings.

Yannacone noted that the size of sample helped determine what kind of peak appeared on the chromatograph, and that WARF chemists in one analysis had used PCB samples much larger than those of the pesticide.

"At similar levels," he charged, "(the PCB) peak would be statistically insignificant compared with the DDE peak."

Yannacone asked whether Coon could be certain that the Bear Creek salmon was not sent to the lab in a plastic bag, which would have introduced more interference from PCB's. Coon said he couldn't be sure, but that WARF asks that "anything having to do with residue analysis not be submitted in a plastic bag."

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