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PCBs turning up in every major waterway in U.S.

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WASHINGTON — Significant levels of polyclorinated biphenyls (PCB's) have turned up in virtually every major waterway across the country, according to recent studies conducted by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

PCB's are a highly toxic chemical that even in small amounts have been found to cause cancer in test animals and are thought to have similar effects on humans.

The HEW studies reveal that the level of PCB contamination is far greater than was originally thought, in at least 12 parts per million, twice the level considered safe by the Food and Drug Administration.

Significant levels of PCB's have also been found in fish samples taken from the Connecticut and Merrimac Rivers, the Penobscot River in Maine, the Hudson River and Lake Champlain, to name a few.

There are also indications that FDA guidelines may be cut by more than half in the near future, to two parts per million, a move that would cause the immediate closing of major, multi-billion dollar fisheries in the Great Lakes and Hudson River region.

The irony is that the federal government knew of the cancer risk of PCB's, which are commonly used as a fire retardant chemical in the manufacture of electrical equipment, as early as 1968.

What the government did not know, and is still trying to find out, is the extent of PCB contamination. It is estimated that 10 million pounds of the lethal chemical are seeping in the environment each year.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimated recently that direct discharges of PCB's into waterways account for only one-half of one per cent of all PCB contamination.

The other 99.5 per cent are entering the environment through landfills and dumps which contain PCB discarded products, according to EPA estimates.

Such products include refrigerators, air conditioners, home heating units, virtually all major electrical products. No section of the country is immune to the PCB problem.

In 1970 and 1971, federal officials thought the PCB's could be restricted by working voluntarily with industry to limit their use to enclosed systems.

The sole U.S. manufacturer, Monsanto Co., agreed at that time to phase out the use of the chemical as soon as it became economically feasible.

But it has become apparent in recent studies that even when use is restricted to sealed equipment, the toxic chemical still finds its way into the environment.

EPA administrator Russell Train testified before a House committee in January that the small amount of PCB's being discharged directly into waterways did not warrant administrative or legal action by EPA.

Train said the agency had no authority to deal "effectively" with the PCB problem and recommended that Congress enact a toxic substances control bill, which it did only three weeks ago — after three years of wrangling.

Ironically, the law itself would have given EPA the authority to screen toxic chemicals before they were marketed. It was only through an amendment, sponsored by Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., that PCB's will be phased out of use completely over the next two and one-half years.

In the meantime, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has for the past four years challenged the "bureaucratic lethargy" of EPA in not using existing authority to ban direct discharges into waterways.

The Water Pollution Control Act of 1974, according to NRDC, requires EPA to issue regulations restricting discharges of toxic substances into waterways.

The act called on EPA within six months of enactment to draw up a list of chemicals and pesticides considered hazardous to human health. Four years and a series of lawsuits later, EPA has only now begun to draw up regulations restricting PCB use under the 1972 law.

Hearings are scheduled to begin April 27 in Washington on the proposed regulations.

But even these, NRDC charges, are inadequate because they do not ban discharges into municipal wastewater treatment facilities, which the group says make up about 80 per cent of all water-related contamination.

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