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Pollution

Within the law

Lethal levels of chemical pollution have caused the death of 10,000 sea birds washed up in the Irish Sea over the past two months. The chemicals, derived from chlorine and known as PCBs, are used in plastics, paints and cosmetics and turn up in many industrial effluents. The normal concentration of PCBs in most animal life is around ten parts in a million but concentrations twenty times as high are being found in the dead birds. Sadly, it is not possible to point to any accidental or illegal dumping of the chemical that could explain the deaths like it explained the death of fish in the Rhine. It seems that the pollution has built up entirely within the framework of the law.

The royal commission to look into the pollution of the environment, which the Prime Minister announced on Thursday, will concern itself with how far the law should be changed, and like all royal commissions, is likely to take its time. The more immediate issue is whether the existing law is being enforced as well as it might. The answer is almost certainly that it is not. Twelve different departments at present dabble in the subject; the most important of them, coming under the aegis of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, being the river authorities. Almost all the 4,500 million gallons of water that are daily polluted by domestic or industrial use pour into rivers and tidal waters. And the law leaves it to each

authority to decide what levels of pollution it will allow. There are 29 river authorities; they all act independently, are all subject to local pressures, and so far have been slow to use anything like the full powers given to them under the Clean Rivers Act of 1961. Some even complain that the equipment needed to measure the chemicals in their water is too expensive to buy. So the situation could be even worse than we suspect. This is where some action is going to be expected of Mr Anthony Crosland's new ministry; he is already setting up two advisory panels, one for farm chemicals in the post-DDT era and another for noise.

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Newport-made PCB in dead sea birds

MONSANTO CHEMICALS whose Newport works is Europe's sole producer of the chemical PCB—traces of which have been found in hundreds of dead sea birds washed up on the north-west coast—claimed today that their own tests had shown the substance was "not highly toxic."

A company spokesman said the information had been obtained during a research programme to determine the biological effects of deliberate doses on various forms of wildlife including fish.

"Very early results confirmed that PCB was not highly toxic," he said. "In a ninety-day study of rats there were no adverse effects where feedings of up to 100 parts per million were administered."

"And in the case of the sea birds which have been found there is nothing to prove that the chemical caused their deaths."

Impossible

He said the company were nevertheless concerned at the findings, although it would have been quite impossible for any of the chemical to have entered the sea at Newport.

The section of the plant at Newport concerned with manufacturing PCB is completely dry and there is no effluent of any sort.

PCB, or polychlorinated biphenyl to give it its full name, is used extensively in the manufacture of plastics, paints, adhesives and as an insulating fluid for electrical equipment.

Drums

All stocks are transported from Newport in sealed drums.

A spokesman at the Nature Conservancy Experimental Station near Peterborough said they had been studying the effects of PCB for some three years.

"Although we have found these traces in dead birds there is nothing to suggest from the evidence we have that it was responsible for their deaths," he said. "Unfortunately there is no real information available yet about the exact level at which PCB becomes toxic to sea birds."

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