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TO BE PREPARED FOR 'NEXT PCB'

Chemical Risk Unit Suggested For Indiana

By MIKE McNAMEE

Indiana should develop a new Office of Chemical Risk in the State Board of Health and a network of scientific "volunteer firemen" to deal with the "next PCB," an independent research group recommends.

Prepared by Butler University's Holcomb Research Institute for the Indiana Academy of Sciences, the report says that the state ran into problems of handling information, setting scientific standards and dealing with federal and local authorities through three environmental crises caused by milk, soil and fish contamination with PCBs, a class of toxic chemicals.

The report was released Friday at the academy's meeting at Anderson.

TO PREPARE for future chemical-environmental problems — the "next PCB" — the report recommends Indiana establish a series of formal and informal agencies to use academic, industrial, state, federal and local resources. "Spill drills" and other exercises would help develop the agencies into an efficient crisis group, the report says.

It also suggests laying advance plans to indemnify affected individuals — which until now required special legislation — and to increase the state's emergency power to remove products contaminated with lethal chemicals from the market.

THE REPORT reviews three cases of environmental contamination with PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — in Indiana which emerged after scientists discovered in the late 1960s that the widely used chemicals were toxic and potentially carcinogenic for humans. The cases were:

• PCBs in milk, discovered by Ohio officials in 1970 and detected by the Indiana State Board of Health in 1974. The chemicals were part of a sealant used on silos of Bloomfield (Ind.) Silo Co. The PCBs leaked into the silage, and cows which fed on it gave milk with residues of the chemical.

• PCBs in sludge from Bloomington's sewage treatment plant, discovered in late 1975. Because they are highly stable and nonflammable, PCBs were used as an insulating fluid in a Westinghouse Electric Corp. plant at Bloomington. Westinghouse's wastewater was sent to the city sewage plant, where PCBs concentrated in the sewage sludge. The sludge was given to local farmers and gardeners for use as fertilizer, and their crops were shown to have absorbed substantial quantities of PCBs.

• PCBs in Lake Michigan fish, found in 1969 as a result of industrial discharge into the lake.

THE HOLCOMB researchers, led by Associate Director William Beranek Jr., found that the state ran into a number of different problems with each crisis. In the milk case, the major problem was resolving the overlapping jurisdictions of the State Board of Health and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

In the Bloomington PCB incident, public information and response — "ranging from apathy to outrage" — presented a major difficulty, the study found.

BUT THE MAIN problem is indemnification of those affected in what the report called "a large-scale environmental disaster that seems to involve no negligence." Neither Westinghouse, the city, the state nor the individuals who used PCB-contaminated sludge knew of the potential for damage; without finding someone at fault, the report asked, "Who should pay the damages?"

The Lake Michigan case, in contrast, presented a good example of agencies within the state cooperating with each other, with their counterparts in other states and with the federal authorities.

TO COPE WITH these problems, the Holcomb report urged the state to:

• Form an Office of Chemical Risk in the State Board of Health to gather and channel all information and inquiries about chemical incidents. The office would not have enforcement or policy responsibilities, but would provide information for those agencies that do regulate affected industries.

• Establish a network — patterned after a volunteer fire department — of scientists from industry and colleges to aid the chemical risk office. They would form a pool of expertise to be called upon whenever an impending crisis threatened.

• DEVELOP A mechanism for inventorying potentially dangerous chemicals used by Indiana firms. This would have to encourage companies to give accurate — not optimistic — information, yet still protect them from nuisance lawsuits and unfounded bad publicity. It also would have to protect firms' trade secrets.

• Pass a "whistle-blower's law" to protect individuals who report chemical spills and other incidents from retaliation by his employer or the public. The state also should subsidize laboratory analyses for persons who legitimately suspect chemical contamination, and may need to license laboratories to establish guidelines for their abilities to detect toxic chemicals.

• EXPAND THE STATE indemnification program, which now covers animals stricken with infectious diseases, to pay farmers for loss of animals poisoned with toxic chemicals. The report points out that most current disaster relief programs do not cover chemical spills or accidents.

The federal government has taken the lead in the field with the passage in 1976 of the Toxic Substances Control Act, the report notes. But the state still has the responsibility of protecting its citizens.

"Two options exist for the state: Seize the initiative early, or wait for federal action and then respond," the report said. "Both require the ability to evaluate technical, social and economic problems in a political arena."

Only with preparation, the report said, will the state have that ability in place to cope with the "next PCB."

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