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CLIPPED BY BACONS

PCB levels persist despite limited use

More than 600 scientists, industrialists, conservationists, and politicians gathered in Chicago last week to discuss polychlorinated biphenyls and what to do about them. Sentiment was strong —but certainly not unanimous—to ban them altogether. Although uses of PCB's have been limited since 1972, levels in the environment apparently haven't declined, and there has been growing concern about the long-term effects of PCB contamination.

Several speakers described the widespread distribution of PCB's in the environment, and others noted the high incidence of PCB's in animals, in humans, and even in human milk. Still others cited studies showing that very low concentrations of PCB's can interfere with reproduction in fish, birds, and mammals.

Assistant secretary of the Interior Nathaniel P. Reed reminded listeners that an alarming number of Great Lakes fish contain more than the maximum 5 ppm of PCB's allowed by Food & Drug Administration guidelines. Multimillion-dollar programs to rebuild Great Lakes fisheries are "for naught," he warns, if the fish can't be harvested. Reed calls for the elimination of all sources of PCB's in the environment within three years.

Other participants took pot shots at the Environmental Protection Agency, which sponsored the conference. For example, Dr. A. Karim Ahmed of the Natural Resources Defense Council complains that although the Water Pollution Control Act directed EPA three years ago to take swift action, "Today there is no meaningful national program to regulate PCB discharges."

On the contrary, says EPA administrator Russell E. Train, "We find ourselves without the authority we need to really cope with the problem." What EPA needs, says Train, is an effective toxic substances control act. □

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