

Viewpoint

PCB plague continues to spread across nation

With apogee in comparison Woody Guthrie, here's a new line for one of the country's best-known folk songs: "From the polluted waters to the Gulf Stream waters, this land is loaded with PCB."

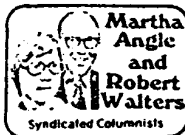
PCBs are polychlorinated biphenyls, a family of toxic, highly persistent industrial chemicals that have caused liver damage and birth defects in laboratory animals.

The redwood forests just like southern coast of Oregon, where a commercial lumber recently discovered that it had purchased — and had to destroy — 30,000 PCB-contaminated old-growth.

The Gulf Stream waters mark the west coast of Florida, where a chemical recently found a market for them in the potential fertility of young men that appeared to be related to past PCB contamination of the subjects' sperm.

This month's reports of PCB contamination aren't limited to those two states. In Franklin, Idaho, a poultry company had to be drug more than 200,000 contaminated chickens and more than 1 million potatoes were destroyed.

In Chatham, Iowa, a packing company destroyed the meat of 20,000 chickens, all purchased from the state of Iowa. In the same state, 100,000 chickens have been found to be contaminated with PCBs and are to be destroyed.



In Billings, Mont., federal health officials have uncovered one of the most pervasive firms whose most used byproduct is suspected of being the source of the most recent outbreak of widespread PCB contamination.

The government investigators already envisaged most of the country's northern quadrant because the Montana company with 100,000 to 200,000 pounds of animal feed weekly throughout Washington, Oregon, Montana,

Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

The Florida experience, described at the mid-Summer annual meeting of the American Chemical Society, led researchers to conclude that 25 percent of a group of male college students involved in the study suffered from functional sterility.

Other scientists reported at the American Chemical Society convention that tons of PCBs fall from the air each year into the Great Lakes.

Food products confiscated, destroyed or banned by federal officials because of PCB contamination discovered in the early 1970s include the following: more than 600,000 eggs in Virginia and North Carolina, 50,000 pounds of turkey roils in South Carolina, 30,000 turkeys in Minnesota and 300,000 chickens in Alaska, New York and North Carolina.

There's more. New York's Hudson River, Alabama's streams and Lake Michigan were found to have such high levels of PCBs that fishing in those waters was banned. Milk contamination has been reported in West Virginia and Ohio.

At any rate, the company that was the sole U.S. producer and marketer of PCBs for almost half a century

is busily propagandizing the public about the real and imagined dangers of industrial chemicals.

The Monsanto Co. of St. Louis, finally halted its production of PCBs (sold under the Aroclor trade name) in the summer of 1977 — but not until it had produced enough of the toxic liquid to float an entire navy.

Monsanto has claimed in recent years that it always was concerned about the dangers posed by PCBs and "has made every effort" to keep the public informed about the hazards.

But when the threat of PCBs was first detected in the early 1970s, Monsanto designated those revelations as mere "publicity stunts" and sensational headlines — mere tactics and sensational reporting.

The company now has mounted an ambitious and expensive advertising campaign designed to demonstrate that chemicals are valuable, if not indispensable, to modern life.

Monsanto's ubiquitous television commercials extol the virtues of chemicals ranging from preservatives to brightening compounds. Never mentioned, however, is the product that will haunt the nation for many decades to come — PCBs.

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