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Faulty PCB data reappears

National reports cite Escondido tests

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ESCONDIDO — Faulty information gleaned from 1975 tests about the presence of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in Escondido drinking water is finding its way back into some national environmental reports.

(PCBs are highly toxic substances used in production of electrical transformers and capacitors. Termed "persistent and nonbiodegradable" by Russell E. Train, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator in Washington, they have been shown to cause skin diseases and liver problems and reproductive anomalies in laboratory animals.)

The April-May issue of the Consumer Advocate, published in New York by the United Consumer Service Corp., echoes

EPA reports presented to Congress in December 1975. Washington Post stories at the time listed Escondido with four other U.S. communities as having evidence of PCBs in tap water.

Follow-up investigations by Larry Michaels, director of the Escondido Mutual Water Co., and inquiries by John Tunney, former California senator, led to apologies from EPA last June.

Michaels had forwarded findings of Metropolitan Water District (MWD) studies to Tunney in response to the Washington Post stories. Robert E. Whaley, MWD chief operations engineer, said that two gas chromatograph tests were taken of Colorado River water, one each from Lake Skinner and Lake Mathews, concerning the possible presence of PCBs.

"The data indicate that no PCBs were found in the two samples of Colorado

River water," Whaley wrote. "We believe the current results should assure you that PCBs are not present in measurable amounts in the water being delivered to you by Metropolitan."

In 1975, General Electric (GE) and the state of New York formulated a pact to begin a \$7 million program to eliminate the chemicals that GE had been flushing into waters near production plants at Hudson Falls and Fort Edward for 25 years. Later the company announced that it had developed two new compounds to replace the dangerous, stable PCBs.

A federal bill requiring testing of potentially dangerous chemicals before release into water or the atmosphere was passed by Congress and signed into law by then President Gerald Ford in October 1976. PCBs were the only chemicals specifically named in the

legislation. Their manufacture, sale or distribution were banned unless EPA ruled that their continued use did not present a threat to human health and the environment.

The tests, completed three months ago, led to a ruling that bans industrial discharge of PCBs directly into water supplies. Manufacture of the chemicals must end by January 1979.

Monsanto Industrial Chemicals, the sole manufacturer of PCBs said it planned to end PCB production by November 1977.

The MWD report suggested two possibilities to Michaels: either there were no PCBs in Escondido drinking water or the source of discharge into the system was within the city. The latter seemed unlikely — gas chromatograph tests are conducted no less often than once a year

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Faulty data noted again

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to monitor levels of herbicides and pesticides in local water. The presence of stable compounds like PCBs would show up, and it never has.

Michaels learned that the test results presented to Congress had not been conducted by EPA, but by Monsanto at a local firm, Capacitor Specialists, which uses PCBs in its production.

"The samples were taken to determine the level of PCBs in the public water supply as background information in determining the amounts of PCBs discharged into the sewer system from the production process," Michaels wrote to Tunney.

"The sampling point for taking the water samples was a drinking fountain within the plant area where the PCBs were used . . . Such sampling procedures are so incredibly unscientific that any results would be totally invalid and would guarantee that PCB contamination would be present in the sample."

"However, such a sample would bear no relationship to any possible contamination of the public water supply . . . As the Colorado River is unpolluted by industrial waste discharge and is controlled by large reservoirs that would tend to maintain traces of any accidental contamination for a long period of time, it is reasonable to assume that there was no contamination when the Monsanto sample was taken in Esccondido."

In its response, EPA concurred and explained that the information was presented to Congress under pressing deadlines that had not allowed more reliable testing. Later formal tests showed no evidence of PCBs in the supply.

"I regret any problems of inconvenience caused by this unfortunate occurrence," wrote Victor Kimm, EPA

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deputy assistant administrator, "and assure you that we will do our best to prevent any recurrence."

Bruce Hayworth, Capacitor Specialists president, said today that his firm's phasing out of PCBs in production should be completed in about a month. He said that the firm, in Escondido for seven years, has never discharged any of the compound, but recycles 100 per cent of its production fluids.

The firm has developed its own alternative compound, which Hayworth said is as environmentally safe as the GE chemicals, while being even less flammable.