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Let's 'learn from experience'

Downey calls for PCBs ban



Rep. Downey

By KARL GROSSMAN

A Long Island Congressman has called for an outright ban in the U.S. of production of PCB's — the toxic chemical linked to illnesses ranging from cancer to mental disorder.

Rep. Thomas Downey, citing an investigation done by his office, said that Japan four years ago banned the production of PCB's.

"We have to learn from the Japanese experience," said the congressman — the youngest member of the House of Representatives. "The Japanese recognized the lethality of the substance, and we must."

Downey, a West Islip Democrat, said a key to moving on PCB's was a proposed federal Toxic Substances Act, which he said has been "bouncing" around Congress since 1971.

He said that when Congress resumes meeting later this month he would push for action on the legislation, introduced by Sen. Warren Magnuson of Washington.

A spokesman for Magnuson, meanwhile, said the full Senate Commerce Committee would begin consideration of the act, also when Congress resumes.

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THE INVESTIGATION into PCB's by Downey's office was conducted by aide Bud Mitzman of Hauppauge, who has long experience in the plastics business.

PCB's or polychlorinated biphenyls are widely used in America as an insulating material in electrical transformers and capacitors, as a plasticizer, in paint, in carbonless copy paper, among other uses.

Japan has since switched to alternative, non-toxic substances, but from 1954 to 1972 used PCB's for the same purposes. In 1970 production was 11,000 tons a year.

Then the country, Mitzman found, underwent the "Kanemia rice bran oil case," a poisoning case stemming from leakage of coolant containing PCB's into cooking oil.

PCB's were seized from their manufacturers. Because of seepage of PCB's from discarded household electrical appliances, a system was established in which appliances to be thrown away were collected separately in Japan.

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IN THE last few years, since PCB's were banned, there has been a decrease in their densities in the Japanese environment. However, in 1974 PCB's were still being found in mothers' milk — in 25 per cent of cases in excess of allowable levels.

In a statement on the Japanese government's stand obtained by Mitzman through the U.S. State Department, it is noted "there is no production, import or export of PCB's at this time and none is contemplated."

Downey, at his Long Island congressional office yesterday, declared: "If the Japanese could come to grips with this poison, why can't we."

He charged that the firms involved in production of PCB's in the U.S. General Electric and Monsanto, have been "fighting tooth and nail against banning it."

Further, Downey said he has conducted correspondence with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and finds "the FDA can't do anything because PCB's are not a food or drug consumed by the public."

THE FEDERAL Environmental Protection Agency "shares our concern" on PCB's, said Downey, but they presently have unclear authority, he said.

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