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Monsanto Halts PCB Production

ST. LOUIS (AP) — The public's fear of rising levels of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) in the nation's water has led the Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co. to halt production of the chemical.

Monsanto, the only maker of PCB dielectric fluids in the U.S. said Tuesday that it planned to withdraw completely from the market by Oct. 31 of next year.

PCB, widely seen as an ideal fire-resistant dielectric fluid for transformers and capacitors, has been also been found to resist biodegradation, causing it to accumulate in the tissues of animals and fish.

"Unfortunately, the very qualities that have made PCBs ideal and even mandatory for these essential uses were also found in the 1970s to be properties causing them to persist and accumulate in the environment," said Earle H. Harbison Jr., general manager of Monsanto's specialty chemicals division.

The company had earlier quit making PCBs for use in carbonless copy paper, fire resistant hydraulic fluids, heat transfer fluids and plasticizers.

Government tests for a three-year period discovered that the levels of PCB in major water basins were not increasing and, in some cases, were actually decreasing Harbason said.

"Despite these positive results," Harbinson said, "it became apparent that the persistent nature of these compounds was being perceived by society as a greater risk than that presented by using less fire resistant fluid in electrical apparatus. "It was at this point that Monsanto made the decision to eventually phase out PCB production for even these sealed dielectric uses."

The extension of the closing date until late next year was done to give equipment manufacturers time to convert to other materials.

Other fluids offer the dielectric properties, Harbison said, but all those currently available have less resistance to fire.

Tests have been conducted on PCBs to determine if they can cause cancer, Harbison said, but studies so far have showed no indication of that.

One of the obstacles to halting PCB equipment, Harbison said, was that fire, insurance, building and electrical codes and regulations in many parts of the country have traditionally required their use in high density population applications where violent failure of a device containing a flammable fluid could result in a fire or explosion of catastrophic proportions.

PCB-filled capacitors not only fail infrequently, but also fail safely, he said.

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