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EPA To Act Against PCB For Capacitors And Transformers

by Richard S. Davis

WASHINGTON -- In a statement filed with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Electronic Industries Association (EIA) said that promulgation of the Agency's proposed standards for toxic pollutant effluent discharges from the chemical polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) will have a severe inflationary impact on the cost of generating and distributing electrical energy.

The PCB chemical, which is produced in this country only by Monsanto under the tradename, Pyronal, is a highly toxic non-biodegradable substance used by the electronics industry in large-size capacitors carrying high voltages. It is used as an impregnating material with conductive oil because of its noncombustible characteristics. PCB is commonly found in the capacitors and transformers used by utilities on power lines and also in other high-voltage situations such as occur in air conditioners.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has issued a draft of an Advance Notice of Proposed Rule Making and a draft Basis and Purposes Document which place limits on the amount of PCB used. Limits to how the toxic chemical can be used are also outlined.

EIA's statement charges that it is highly unlikely that the capacitor and transformer industries can meet EPA's standards and refers to figures suggesting that a halt in the manufacture of PCB-impregnated transformers and capacitors could cost the industry $500 million a year.

The EIA asks the EPA to consider information which suggests that the toxic chemical is safely contained in the industry's products and that the amount of waste and leakage is so miniscule, the environment is unaffected.

A spokesperson for EPA, in Washington, told Buyers' News that he though it likely the standards would, if anything, get tougher in their final form despite the EIA statement. The EPA has recevived reports of high levels of PCB in the Great Lakes' fish and evidence from the Communicable Disease Center in Atlanta that PCB can be dangerous even in very small amounts.

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Move to Ban PCBs Gets Federal Boost

The move to ban the use of PCBs, a group of industrial chemicals, in Wisconsin got an assist last week from the assistant secretary of the U.S. Dept. of Interior.

Nathaniel Reed wrote the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency of the growing concern for polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) and growing evidence — including some from Wisconsin — that they might be harmful to health. (See above story.)

"There appears to be broad unanimity for the banning of this family of industrial contaminants," Reed wrote, "and I recommend that this be done at the earliest moment."

After the presence of PCBs were detected in increasingly large quantitites in fish in Wisconsin and Great Lakes waters, the State Natural Resources Board set up public hearings to consider banning them entirely.

In Reed's letter, he called attention to the pending Wisconsin DNR action, and noted that the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency had unanimously urged a federal ban on PCB's, as had the Upper Great Lakes Committee of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission.

"The intensity of public concern is high and is growing rapidly," Reed said. "I see this (banning) as the only means to avert a threat to national fish and wildlife resources and to the public health."