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Dampening PCB threat

As the saying goes, the Senate and House of the State Legislature have heard enough, seen enough of the growing environmental danger posed by polychlorinated biphenyl to pass, without a single dissenting vote, a law curbing PCB use in Michigan.

It is a tough law, perhaps the toughest yet enacted by any state, that now awaits the governor's signature.

What the country needs, of course, is a federal law setting a nationwide standard for PCB — a toxic chemical compound used in certain manufacturing processes. Michigan's action may spur that, but the legislature is to be commended for not waiting upon Washington to act.

PCB's danger is not merely its toxidity to fish and fowl which is consumed by humans. Polychlorinated biphenyl resists heat and decomposition. It just doesn't break down and dilute itself away.

Having been used widely in hydraulic and heat transfer fluids, insulation, laminates, textile coverings, adhesives and casting waxes, a lot of it has got into streams and lakes, including the Great Lakes.

The Michigan law is going to stop a lot of that quickly and slow down the rest of it over a three-year period with tougher PCB levels in parts per million diminishing rapidly over the next three years.

By the end of that time there will be hardly any PCB used or sold in Michigan — much of which has already been stopped. Any products that use it will have to meet extremely small ppm standards by then and clearly state it on any label. It will be confined to enclosed parts. Mostly it will be limited to encased electric transistors.

It's a good law, even though the total case against PCB hasn't been made. It's a known danger to living creatures, but just how much to humans isn't clear. Studies are continuing on that, as they must. Nonetheless, it's proper that we have the law we have now and not run excessive buildup risks, the same as with Red Dye No. 2

But as has been pointed out, Michigan law can't stop air-blown PCB pollution from other states where no such law yet exists. This is why federal prohibition is needed.

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