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PCBs: Global Pollutants 1900

The Monsanto Company, the only manufacturer in the United States of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) recently announced that it will stop producing the toxic industrial chemicals that are being leaked, spilled, or vaporized into the environment at the rate of 10 million lb. a year. The inert, fire-resistant compounds that are widely used in electrical equipment, plastics, paints, printers' inks, sealants, adhesives, and lubricants, have been found in wildlife and fish from tributaries of the Yukon to the Rio Grande. One of the most heavily PCB-polluted waterways, the Hudson River, receives the compound from two capacitator plants of General Electric, which has been ordered to stop discharging the hazardous substance by September 30.

The ubiquitous, persistant compounds have caused liver cancer and reproductive failure in experimental animals and workers exposed to PCB in factories producing electrical capacitators have complained of chloracne, nausea, dizziness, asthmatic bronchitis, nasal and eye irritation. In 1968 some 1000 Japanese citizens who ate rice oil contaminated with PCB developed darkened skin, severe acne, an eye discharge, and other symptoms of what became known as Yoshu oil disease. Infants exposed in utero to PCB acquired the resistant disease for which no treatment is known.

Although PCBs have been used for more than 45 years, the threat they posed to the environment was not recognized until 1966. Seven years later 24 member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development signed a commitment to control the toxic chemicals, but West Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United States were recently charged with violating the agreement. Several years ago a group of Nobel scientists warned that PCB contamination may reach levels high enough "to damage ecosystems irreversibly on a worldwide scale before the damage is recognized."

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