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PCB problem not hopeless

By FRED LUKS

Fishermen may find some solace in the fact that all domestic production of poly-chlorinated biphenyls, more commonly known as PCB's, is to cease at the end of the year.

The material, marketed under the trade name of AROCLOR by the Monsanto Chemical Company, its sole U.S. producer, is the substance that has rendered resident fishes of the Hudson River and many other waters, unsafe to eat. Research, that started over 10 years ago, disclosed that PCB's, when ingested into the human system through the eating of PCB-contaminated fish, can result in malfunction of vital organs, generate cancer and cause birth defects.

Over 500-million pounds of PCB's have been manufactured by Monsanto since 1930, and according to a report by the Sport Fishing Institute of Washington, D.C., there's at least 140 million pounds of the stuff left for biological activity after the larger portion has been accounted for through natural dissipative forces and incineration.

In the case of the Hudson River, that "biological activity" could well last over a hundred years even if there's a reasonably successful effort to dredge the toxic chemical from a portion of the river upstate where it was dumped by the General Electric Company which used PCB's in the manufacture of capacitators and transformers.

The PCB's have settled in the bottom sediments where they have been absorbed by feeding fish. Through the bioaccumulation process, the chemical lodges in the fatty tissues. Many species of fish examinated in the Hudson have been found to be carrying in excess of the "5 parts per million", the guideline deemed safe by the Food and Drug Administration.

Eels, because of the large amount of fatty tissues, have been known to be carrying as much as 100+ ppm of the PCB substance in their bodies.

Aside from the discontinuance of the manufacture of PCB, a hope that the toxic chemical might be eliminated from the environment rests in their elimination through bacterial action. A Canadian scientist has found that certain bacteria such as the Pseudo monas can digest the PCB's. In sewage sludge, the bacteria have dramatically reduced PCB's from 200,000 to 10 parts per billion.

On the heels of the discovery, the General Electric Company, which is threatened by millions of dollars of suits for PCB contamination, has put teams of the best microbiologists to work to find how best the bacteria can be introduced into areas where PCB damage has been the greatest.

The PCB damage has been unquestionably been disastrous but it's not a hopeless situation. More than one scientist has stated the problem can be licked if enough money and research are put into it.

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