

## Letters from GE and Monsanto

*Sierra's "Pandora's Poison" (September/October 1994) includes misleading and inaccurate accusations that leave readers with a false view of both the science of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and Monsanto's actions.*

Monsanto acted responsibly in the manufacture of PCBs, and in the eventual phaseout of the product once evidence about its persistence in the environment was confirmed. In 1970, Monsanto widely communicated the newly recognized environmental concern and launched an immediate voluntary phaseout of all sales of PCB products for "open applications" that could lead to uncontrolled environmental release. Monsanto considered halting production of PCBs in the early 1970s, but no substitutes were commercially available for fire-resistant dielectric fluid. This dilemma was recognized in 1975 by EPA Administrator Russell Train, who cautioned that massive power disruption would occur if Monsanto were to cease production before suitable replacement fluids became available.

Following assurances that replacement products were at hand, Monsanto voluntarily totally ceased production and sales of PCBs in 1977.

Allegations in the article that Monsanto knew about adverse health effects from exposure to PCBs since the 1930s and covered up the information are not true. Monsanto has never concealed any hazard of PCBs. The animal tests and other data referred to in the article were publicly known for decades and were considered in establishing handling guidelines for PCBs. Furthermore, the original study by Dr. Cecil K. Drinker, referenced in the article, was in fact published by the Harvard School of Public Health following its open presentation at a meeting attended by government representatives.

Dr. Drinker himself said in 1937 that PCBs are safe and "operations employing them can easily be safeguarded." Drinker's further studies determined that the chemical he originally believed to be causing liver effects in animals was not a PCB. In 1939, Dr. Drinker publicly stated that the PCB product he tested was only mildly toxic if inhaled over long periods of time.

Sierra claims that Monsanto falsified cancer research related to PCBs. This again is absolutely wrong. The actual interim study reports and tissue slides from the studies of Monsanto products, conducted by a then nationally recognized independent laboratory, were turned over to the government. The government has never challenged these PCB studies or indicated that Monsanto had done anything wrong.

Claims of "cover-ups" and "sacrificing 'life itself' to corporate profits" are untrue and out of touch with Monsanto's way of doing business.

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"Pandora's Poison" is an unfortunate example of an advocate ignoring facts in an attempt to further preconceived and unfounded theories. The claim of a 50-year conspiracy to keep information about PCBs from virtually everyone defies the reality of a long, public record of scientific investigation and communication. Unreported is Dr. Drinker's later research that exonerated PCBs from causing health effects in the workers he had studied.

PCBs have been among the most heavily scrutinized chemicals over the last two decades. None of the human epidemiological studies - including a number involving General Electric workers - establish any significant link between exposure to PCBs and serious illness or increased incidence of cancer.

General Electric acknowledges that there are issues regarding PCBs upon which reasonable minds may differ, but we maintain that our opinions are based on long occupational experience and the large body of public scientific literature - the same literature that "Pandora's Poison" claims GE somehow suppressed.

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Eric Francis replies: Stark denials in the face of documented evidence to the contrary have been corporate policy at Monsanto and GE for decades. These letters are only the latest examples. While Monsanto says it "never concealed any hazard of PCBs," neither it nor GE can yet bring themselves to admit any; Monsanto acted only "once evidence about the material's persistence ... was confirmed" -not because of any health risk. Note also that its "voluntary" cessation of sales and production came the year after PCBs were banned by the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976.

Responsibility to warn the public begins not when a chemical is proven to be harmful, but when it is suspected to be so. That moment came in 1937 when Dr. Drinker found liver damage in rats exposed to Halowax, a product made with PCBs. By citing Drinker's subsequent contradictory reports - which, it should be noted, are not part of the public record - GE and Monsanto try to have it both ways, suggesting here that the studies relieved them of the responsibility to inform the public, while maintaining in court - as recently as last October, in GE's case - that the original Drinker study constituted notice that PCBs were toxic.

That the government never challenged Monsanto's PCB tests at the notoriously corrupt IBT Lab is no more proof of their probity than it is of PCBs' safety. GE's Ramsey still doesn't recognize any link between exposure to PCBs and serious illness. Both writers ignore the EPA's reassessment of dioxin and PCBs (see "Elementary Enemy," page 30), which concluded that adverse effects can be expected at or near current exposure levels - this thanks to companies that knew better but failed to act.