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PCBs in fish

PCBs have put the lid on angling in Connecticut's Housatonic River, which enters from Massachusetts and empties into Long Island Sound. Fish taken from the upper third of the river are unsafe, and fish for several miles downstream of that point are "suspect." About half the length of the river in Connecticut is covered by the warning, issued by the state after alarming levels of the chemical were found in fish and bottom sediments.

Many industries released PCBs, used as lubricants in electronic components, into the Housatonic in the past. The only known discharge of PCBs still taking place is from the General Electric Company plant at Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Although it no longer uses PCBs, it has a residue in its waste and drainage water. Massachusetts and the Environmental Protection Agency allow the plant to release up to four ounces daily.

Other PCB news includes:

✓ The Massachusetts Public Health Commission recently banned lobster fishing along a 20-mile stretch of coastline, including New Bedford Harbor, because of PCB contamination.

✓ The Food and Drug Administration proposes to lower permissible PCB levels in commercial fish from five parts per million to two ppm. Canada enacted similar guidelines last year.

✓ For at least three or four years unlicensed fishermen on Lake Michigan have been netting lake trout contaminated by PCBs and selling them to consumers. During that time, agents of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources have waged a bitter, and at times dangerous, war against the fishermen. The lake trout, 800,000 pounds last year, contain as much as 40 ppm of PCB in their tissues. Michigan agents have been shot at and subjected to high-speed boat attacks.

✓ Monsanto Company, the only American manufacturer of PCBs, ceased production of it in October. But the problem will persist for years. "They don't break down biologically in the environment," says EPA's Daniel Moon, "and they accumulate until they build up to where they cause some harm."

(See "Of PCB ppms from GE . . ." by Robert H. Boyle, November 1975.)