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PCBs Become Major Worry for Environmentalists

By Richard C. Klei-
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During the late 1960s, PCBs (an industrial chemical) were merely nuisance blips on scopes of devices used to measure amounts of the pesticide DDT in the atmosphere.

Today, with quantities of the virtually outlawed DDT dwindling, the amounts of PCB in the atmosphere are growing. The chemical, in fact, has replaced DDT as a major worry for fish managers around the Great Lakes.

In some ways it is more worrisome. It appears to be more widespread than DDT and even after a lot of investigation it is unclear exactly how it gets into the water.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are of special concern since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has threatened to keep fish out of interstate markets if they contain more than 5 parts per million.

The biggest salmon and lake trout hauled in by sportmen contain far more than that

and such an embargo could affect chub and whitefish — the chief commercially caught fish in Lake Michigan.

Subject to Seizure

Last January, Donald Heatton of Chicago, FDA regional director, caused a stir by noting that many chub in Lake Michigan could be expected to exceed the FDA's so-called action limit and would be subject to seizure.

None has been seized yet and those tested by FDA in Wisconsin waters in December contained only about 3 parts per million.

The only recent seizures of Lake Michigan fish, Heatton said, were salmon caught in waters off Michigan last fall during the spawning run. They contain over 10 parts per million, he said.

Warnings Issued

High levels of PCBs in trout and salmon generally are ignored by sport fishermen because they feel they discard

the fatty part of a fish in which PCBs concentrate.

The Wisconsin Division of Health has warned the public to limit themselves to not more than a week of fish that exceed the tolerance level, and for pregnant women to avoid it altogether.

An attempt to further limit consumption of sport fish could cause wide repercussions in a multi-million-dollar Lake Michigan recreational industry.

But some people question the logic of banning food fish with 5 parts per million and allowing an angler to take home 50 or 60 pounds of trophy salmon or trout containing 20 parts.

Heatton notes that he has no jurisdiction over sport fish.

The bigger the fish, the more

the PCBs. Tests completed this month by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources show a range in lake trout from 2.07 parts per million in a 16 inch fish to 28.7 parts in a 27 inch.

According to Paul DeGurse, DNR supervisor of technical investigations, trout and salmon generally do not go over 5 parts per million until they reach the 3 pound size.

Control Urged

The only PCB manufacturer in the U.S., Monsanto Industrial Chemical Co., voluntarily stopped use of PCB for use in transformers and capacitors in closed water systems. Now, it has only 50 customers buying 40 million pounds a year, compared with thousands buying 80 million pounds before 1971.

DeGurse and Robert Bennett

of the Great Lakes fisheries laboratory at Ann Arbor, Mich., both say closing off PCB discharges is the only real solution to the problem.

A DNR Great Lakes Fisheries Task Force strongly advised the need for state and federal legislation to control the sale, use and disposal of PCBs "if it is determined that discharges cannot be effectively controlled by other means."

Bennett points out that although PCBs have been around since 1929, control of use is difficult because many people do not know when they are using them — as they did with DDT.

According to Stanton Klei-
nert, DNR chief of surveillance, 214 compounds ranging from oils to crystals use PCBs. Products run the gamut from

electrical fixtures to wire insulation, vinyl chloride film, hydraulic fluids, sealants, solvents, epoxy paint, castings for wood or concrete, adhesives and carbonless copy paper.

Persist in Environment

Like DDT, they concentrate in fats and persist in the environment for years.

"What I really suspect, Klei-
nert says, "is that a lot of the problem is due to fallout from the atmosphere and what already exists in plants."

The total discharge from 32 wastewater treatment plants, including Milwaukee's, showed only 1.98 pounds a day being discharged, but 62% of that was from two pulp and paper mills that recycle waste paper.

Carbonless copy paper

seems to be a major source, Klei-
nert said, because it contains 2 parts per million.

Canal Box Material

The Food and Drug Administration in 1971 found that paper-
back dividers in a cereal box contained much PCB.

Based in part on this, FDA set temporary tolerances for food packaging material. Objections were filed but no public hearings had been held.

Present FDA tolerances are 10 parts per million in food packaging material intended for human food; 2.5 parts in milk and dairy products; 5 parts in poultry; 5 parts in eggs; 2 parts in animal feeds and 2 parts in baby foods.

According to Heatton, the total dose likely to be taken by humans in an average diet poses no immediate hazard. But "the possibility of potential long term hazards necessitates reduction of levels of PCBs in foods as soon as possible."