Why Public Fear Threatens Public Health

By Lee Botts

The people of the Great Lakes region need to decide what to do about the barrels of liquids containing PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) that are being stacked up at power plants and factories around the region.



The choice is between leaving them in storage (and trusting that they will never escape into the environment) or destroying the chemicals so they are no longer dangerous. This issue of the *Communicator* is devoted to information about the PCB dilemma—why they are being stored and ways they could be destroyed.

No region of the country has more at stake than ours in deciding how to handle PCBs safely. It was in the Great Lakes that scientists discovered that PCBs, like their cousin DDT, can enter the food chain and contaminate entire ecosystems.

This is where commerical fisherman whose families have fished the Great Lakes for four generations have had their livelihood destroyed because of the presence of PCBs in quantities almost too small to be imagined. This is where the excitement of some of the best sports fishing in the world is marred by the risk of eating more than small amounts of the lakes' huge salmon and trout.

With regulation of PCBs to keep them from further contaminating the environment, our industries are faced with huge costs for safe storage because there is no agreed-upon other way of handling them. My question is: can we afford *not* to destroy PCBs when we can?

The problem is that people are afraid of hazardous chemical wastes. Their fear is based on almost daily disclosure of public health and environmental problems caused by past unsafe handling. Their fear is making the problem worse by preventing communities and neighborhoods from allowing disposal, even if the disposal methods actually destroy the PCBs.

PCBs Are Everybody's Problem

Worse because, in the case of PCBs and other wastes, lack of accessible disposal facilities means that industries must either put the wastes in storage or get rid of them secretly and illegally. Communities need to decide whether it is riskier to allow regulated and monitored destruction or to trust that accidents and/or illegal dumping will never happen.

The assumption that there is no safe disposal technology leads to attitudes that PCBs ought to be someone else's problem. But PCBs are some of the most widely used chemicals, as well as some of the most persistent. They are everyone's problem, because everyone has benefited from their use in electrical transformers, capacitors, fluorescent lighting fixtures, television sets, and other things that we depend on in an industrial society.

Just as all communities must provide for disposal of household garbage, they also have a responsibility for safe disposal of hazardous chemicals used in the community.

PCBs were used for 40 years before we knew how dangerous they were. Now that we know the problem, laws have been passed to make their manufacture and use illegal in the U.S. Industry is removing them from use and putting them in storage. But, industry has no way at present of getting rid of high-level PCBs.

There are good signs that the PCBs already in the Great Lakes are declining. This means that if no additional PCBs get into the system, the lakes may, ultimately cleanse themselves of PCB contamination. We must destroy the PCBs removed from use under the new laws to make sure that no more get into the Great Lakes, or the rivers, or the groundwater, or the air.

In recent months the Great Lakes Basin Commission has joined forces with other agencies and institutions to draw attention to the need for deciding what to do about PCBs. In Michigan and Indiana, we have already discovered that industry and environmentalists have a common interest in providing for safe handling and disposal of PCBs. We have learned that there is great agreement on incineration as the best immediate means of disposal, but we have also learned that communities are afraid to allow it.

In coming months we will continue discussing this problem elsewhere in the region. I urge citizens in the Great Lakes to find out what is happening to PCBs in their communities, and consider under what conditions disposal should be allowed.

Obviously, officials and citizens confronted with the PCB dilemma need more information. The information we have about PCBs and their disposal is available to anyone. Let us know if you want more information and whether you would like our help in promoting consideration of the problem in your community.

Let us know also, if you have ideas about how citizens ought to be involved in deciding whether to allow PCB disposal in their community. The PCB problem will not go away. It is time to search for solutions, for the sake of the Great Lakes and the people who depend on them. □



In some places, salmon than 20 inches have high PCBs levels and may be unsafe to eat.

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