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Samples Of State Fish Show High PCB Levels

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Capital Reporter

HARTFORD (CSNB) — Dangerous levels of a toxic chemical compound known as PCB are still turning up in samples of Connecticut fish. But officials aren't sure what the results of their tests mean.

PCB — polychlorinated biphenyls — is a heat-resistant industrial chemical that has been linked to cancer and has been known to cause skin disorders and reproductive failure.

The problem with the compound is that it can be destroyed only by a special incineration process at 2,700 degrees Fahrenheit. That means the majority of all PCB's ever used remain in the environment.

Fish taken from the Connecticut River in December 1975 revealed the highest PCB levels of recent samples, with a concentration of 5.1 parts per million.

The federal standard is 3 parts per million in edible portions of fish. Safety standards vary, however, Canada has set guidelines of 2 parts per million.

The chief of the water supplies division of the State Health Department admitted that the way those fish were tested was "not a very good way to do it."

The Department tested a composite of six fish to produce the 5.1 reading, and it was impossible to determine whether one fish had an extremely high concentration of PCB, or whether all six contained similar amounts.

Water Supplies chief Richard Woodhull added that a high reading from the Connecticut River was unexpected. Other area officials are watching for potential problems at the Park River in Hartford, the Quinnipiac near Meriden, and Lake Lillinonah, a catch basin for the Housatonic.

Individual December samples from the Housatonic River ranged from a low of 15 to a high of 2.8 per million. Stamford harbor tests ranged

from .07 to .33 ppm. Miantic River tests showed a 2 ppm.

"Nothing you would get is fatal or a toxic dose," said Kathryn Glynn of the Health Department. "But you would worry about the amount you were taking in."

The Health Department laboratories, she added, combine several fish samples from one waterway both to speed up results and because some testing procedures call for certain weights which individual samples do not meet.

She claimed the composite test had some validity, since the average consumer eats fish with both high and low PCB concentrations.

"Sophisticated chemistry," is needed to determine how serious the PCB problem really is, according to Robert E. Taylor, director of the Department of Environmental

Protection water compliance unit.

Taylor said some of the tests used to determine PCB levels were for "a lot of other things" as well, and that reports are not always given in correct units.

Although the Connecticut tests were inconclusive, Taylor claimed, the DEP and Health Department "have a fairly good feel for a lack of danger."

The state cannot test any more thoroughly, according to Taylor, because the Health department does not have the equipment necessary to make some of the measurements involved in testing water for PCB's.

For example, there is the matter of the DEP testing at the Universal Manufacturing Corporation in Bridgeport, the only state industry which is known to use PCB's.