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Poisons found in Lake Superior fish

Samples of 28 different kinds of fish taken from Lake Superior have revealed the presence of toxic industrial chemicals called PCBs—polychlorinated biphenyls.

In a three-week tour of the lake last month by a group of Duluth scientists, samples showed the presence of certain heavy metals such as mercury, cadmium and arsenic in the fish. Also found were traces of a variety of organic industrial compounds including four different forms of DDT, a pesticide banned in the U.S. several years ago.

These are among preliminary findings of an extensive study which have been released by Wayland R. Swain, director of the Lake Superior Basin Study Center. The center is conducting the study in cooperation with the Michigan and Minnesota Departments of Natural Resources and the Ontario Ministry of the Environment.

All fish taken as samples showed the presence of PCBs, Swain said, but few contained levels of the compounds high enough to be considered immediately alarming.

The fish containing the highest levels of PCBs are generally not consumed directly by humans, but some are part of the lake's food chain.

This means the toxic compounds, which some scientists believe may cause cancers, could eventually find their way into the human body, Swain said.

The fish containing the highest PCB level found in Lake Superior was the Cisco-wet trout, an oily deep-water fish.

PCBs are used in such industrial products as plastics, printers' ink, hydraulic fluid and electrical insulators.

Another part of the study will concentrate on how the PCBs and other compounds pass up through the food chain.

Swain, an associate professor of biology and preventive medicine at UMD's School of Medicine, and three medical school laboratory technicians, spent June 6-27 on the lake in a 95-foot converted taking fish minesweeper samples.

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