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Toxic Paint Muddies a Beloved Creek in Central Montana

BYLINE: By JIM ROBBINS

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Big Spring Creek rises up out of the prairie at the cottonwood-tree-shaded state fish hatchery a few miles outside this agricultural hamlet. It oxbows several miles through farmland and pine-studded bluffs and into town, through neighborhoods and downtown.

The deep, clear creek also flows through the center of life here. The water is piped without treatment into the faucets of city residents, fishermen come from around the country to drop flies into its pools, children and adults float the stream in inner tubes, and a local tavern has a hole in the floor a few steps from the bar which allows patrons to watch swimming fish while they drink.

"Lewistown wouldn't be here if it weren't for Big Spring Creek," said Torger Oaas, a local lawyer.

That is why high levels of toxic PCB's found in the stream and their unlikely source have sent a ripple of shock through this central Montana town of 4,000.

PCB's were first discovered in the stream in the early 1990's, but at low levels. An advisory was placed on eating fish. But after an old industrial site at Brewery Flats, which officials thought was the likely source, was cleaned up, they kept finding PCB's. Last year, they started sampling above the flats, which no one had thought to do before.

"The levels got higher and higher the closer you got to the hatchery," said Don Skaar, a pollution control biologist with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. "We sampled fish right below the hatchery and they had levels 30 times the 'no eat' levels. It was totally out of the blue."

The problem turned out to be the blue-green paint that was used on the walls of the hatchery. Since the 1960's the paint, with high levels of PCB's that were added to make it more elastic, has been flaking off the concrete walls at the hatchery, washing downstream and accumulating in a toxic layer of sediment, a foot below the creek bottom in some places.

PCB's were classified as a "probable carcinogen" by the federal government and banned in 1977. The walls of the hatchery here were painted in 1959.

Fish, Wildlife and Parks, which owns the hatchery, has drained and closed the raceways. Workers killed nearly three-quarters of a million young fish, tainted by the toxic paint, by herding them into a small area and adding lethal levels of a tranquilizer to the water. They also posted a "do no eat" order for all fish taken from the stream, which are not hatchery fish but have been contaminated by paint flakes there.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently took blood from more than a hundred local residents to test PCB levels. Results are due in October.

The sudden appearance of a snake in what many thought of as Eden has been unsettling.

"When we moved here in 1985 my boy caught a big brown trout before we unloaded the truck," said Marty Paulson, a retired mail carrier. Big Spring Creek forms the back boundary of his yard.

Every so often, Mr. Paulson said, he would catch a fish from his yard, clean it, roll it in corn flour and fry it up for dinner. No more.

"The last fish I caught was ugly," he said, shaking his head. "It had a big head, a skinny little body and was green. I lost my appetite."

The "do not eat" warning did not worry several fly fishermen who were casting flies into Big Spring Creek recently. Some had not seen the small signs warning against eating the fish. Others released all of their catch. One said he did not care.

"If I ate 10 fish a day for 40 years I guess I might be dead," Richard Hansen, an insurance adjuster from Lewistown, said with a shrug as he walked down a dirt road clad in tight brown neoprene waders. "Otherwise it's not a big deal."

But nearby property owners think it is big deal. "What does it do to my property value?" asked Bill Haugen, a general contractor whose backyard lawn rolls down to the stream. "It adds doubt."

Both Mr. Haugen and Mr. Paulson are part of a class-action lawsuit against the state and the Monsanto Company, which made the paint, and are represented by Mr. Oaas. They want the creek back the way it was, which would probably mean dredging the bottom, especially near the hatchery. The fish, on the other hand, may have high PCB levels for five years or more. A lawyer representing Monsanto did not return calls seeking comment. There was considerable talk about the PCB's at the Montana Tavern, on Lewistown's Main Street, which has an unusual connection to the stream.

The creek runs under the streets of downtown Lewistown for three blocks or so before it emerges into the open. There is a wooden box with a plexiglass top over a hole in the tavern floor that looks down on the stream, where a spotlight illuminates the long sleek bodies of trout. Jim Awbery, the bar's owner, said his son once caught a six-pound brown trout in the hole.

Mr. Awbery said people had come from all over to see the bar with a trout stream underneath. And PCB's or not, he said, "they'll keep coming."

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GRAPHIC: Photo: Like many fishermen, Michael Norgard said he was unaware that PCB's in Big Spring Creek were a concern, though some signs are posted. (Photo by Lynn Dondaldson for The New York Times)

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