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BROWNIES--These five-pound brown trout were stocked just one year earlier as seven inch fingerlings. Phenomenal growth but these beauties too are not immune from PCB's. The happy angler in photo is Joe Prescott, president of Orleans County Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs. -(J-R Photo)



CHINOOK BEAUTY--Mike Townsend of the N.Y. State Department of Environmental Conservation's Cape Vincent Fisheries inspects a 10-pound chinook salmon taken last spring from Oak Orchard Creek at Point Breeze. A healthy looking fish.....but is it safe to eat? -(J-R Photo)

MONS 032913

A Question Unanswered

Are Lake Salmon Safe to Eat??

By R. DON GOODWIN

The salmon restoration program in Lake Ontario and its feeder streams and rivers is in jeopardy although few government conservationists will admit it.

One man who does wields a pretty heavy clout. He is Nathaniel P. Reed, U.S. Fish, Wildlife and Park assistant secretary and he makes no bones about it. Reed said the incidence of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB), a toxic industrial chemical substance similar to DDT, in fish makes a folly of a salmon restoration program in any body of water in the United States subject to PCB residues.

In an address to a federally sponsored conference on PCB's held in Chicago recently, Reed said his department "cannot justify a salmon restoration program in any northeastern river system where the fish will be subjected to PCB."

And Lake Ontario's coho and chinook salmon are known to contain levels of PCB. This was borne out in a testing program conducted by the State Department of Environmental Conservation last year.

Reed, continuing on PCB's during his Chicago talk, said that "17 years and $29 million have been spent to control the parasitic sea lamprey in the Great Lakes which has enabled a successful state and federal restocking program involving more than 150 million lake trout, splake, coho salmon, chinook salmon, brook and brown trout. The resulting sport fishing of these salmonoid currently contributes approximately $350 million annually to the Great Lakes states and the Province of Ontario," Reed explained.

"All our efforts are for naught," Reed continued, "if these fish cannot be harvested and we now face this stark possibility," he added.

"A significant portion of these fish contain PCB residues in excess of the current 5.0 ppm (parts per million), the maximum level established by the Food and Drug Administration allowed in fish to be used for food. As a result, warnings have been issued about the consumption of large lake trout and salmon from Lakes Michigan.

"To varying degrees a similar PCB program exists in Lakes Superior, Huron and Ostario. Although the contamination by PCB's is particularly evident in salmonoid, the problem is also present in commercial species such as carp, chubs, smelt and alewives."

Sounding a call for drastic action from Congress, Reed told his audience, "The irony of our position today is that our left hand is spending millions of dollars and thousands of manyears to establish a crucial resource, while our right hand renders each new growth of this resource malignant. Our new resource will not only self-destruct but can place the human population in mortal danger.

"Quite frankly," Reed stated, "I am thoroughly disgusted by the gnashing of teeth, wailing and rubbing of hands. To the agencies which have the enforcement responsibilities, a word on behalf of the bewildered but concerned American people – get on with it!"

PCB's have a wide range of commercial uses. The most significant is insulation in electrical transformers and capacitors, because of PCB's chemical stability, fire resistance, and electrical insulating properties.

Used throughout the world for over 40 years, PCB's in the 1960s drew international concern as the full extent of their toxicity, persistence, and widespread environmental contamination was discovered.

In 1970 the problem was thought to be resolved when Monsanto Corp., the St. Louis-based firm which is the sole manufacturer of PCB's in the U.S., voluntarily cut back its production of PCB's for use only in "closed cycle" capacitors and transformers.

However, in 1976 several reports indicate that PCB contamination is still widespread, despite Monsanto's actions, and that disposal of PCB-containing equipment and air emissions may be far more important sources of chemical contamination that discharges into waterways. As a result some environmentalists have called for a ban on PCB use.

The Environmental Protection Agency has no comprehensive authority to regulate toxic substances in the environment because Congress has been debating such legislation for over five years without successful conclusion. However, EPA has not yet used its water pollution control authorities to regulate discharges of especially toxic pollutants.

Thus far, EPA's efforts have been limited to trying to get individual sources of PCB's to reduce their discharges as much as possible before they receive a permit to operate.

While EPA is far behind in using specific authorities it does have to deal with the PCB problem, Reed pointed out. "This is a national problem," Reed stated. "PCB residues were found in all of the fish samples from 160 stations located in major river systems throughout the United States and in almost all the bird samples taken since 1970." Reed noted that even Yukon River in Alaska produced fish inflicted with PCB's.

Last year the Journal-Register reported that samplings of salmonoid taken from Lake Ontario showed PCB contamination of between 10 and 12 ppm's. These results prompted Ogden Reid, N.Y. Department of Environmental Conservation commissioner, to first issue a warning not to eat chinook or coho salmon but after a huddle with the State Department of Health this advisory was changed to indicate the salmon are safe to eat providing they are not taken into the diet more than once a week.

At the time of the last J-R update on the salmon contamination (Oct. 31, 1975) it was reported that the Department of Environmental's Region Eight office in Avon had conducted further testing of Lake Ontario fish the latter part of August through the first week in September. Results of this testing were promised a J-R reporter as soon as they were received.

This week further inquiry into the test results got nowhere. A call to the Region Eight office in Avon resulted in the J-R being referred to DEC's director of communications, Robert McManus, in Albany.

McManus admitted the testing program had been performed in August-September of 1975 but said, "If the results were made known I have not seen them. As far as I know they have not been released."

Another DEC official said he thought it "ridiculous" that the department could shed no light on the testing results. He concurred there had been more than enough time to analyze the fish and determine the amount of PCB's. "This puts the entire department in a bad light," he added.

In the meantime the spring salmon run approaches and there are probably more than just a few who want to know: "Is it safe to eat our lunker catches?"

The J-R would like to know, too.

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