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Watch striped bass from the Saugatuck

HARTFORD—Recent test results for striped bass from the Westport area of the Saugatuck River have been flirting with the danger level for the toxic chemical PCB.

A possible lowering of the federal limit on PCBs could also affect area fishing.

Levels of 4.3 parts per million (ppm) in bass from the river were reported by the Department of Health. The levels are within the temporary federal limit of 5 ppm, but the U.S. government is considering changing that standard to only 2 ppm, which is the current level allowed by Canada.

"If we find fish exceeding the federal limit, the Health Department will issue a general statement warning the public and we would recommend that people not fish there, or even end up closing the area," said Robert Cosgrove of the Department of Health last week.

PCB's —polychlorinated biphenyls—are heat-resistant industrial chemicals that have been linked with cancer, skin disorders, and reproductive failure. They have been found throughout the state in varying concentrations.

Area shellfish are well within the federal standards, with clams from the Darien beds showing only trace amounts of PCB.

The contaminated fish probably migrate to the Westport area through the Sound from the Hudson River in New York, according to Robert Jones, the biologist who collects samples for the DOH.

New York officials banned striped bass from the Hudson last fall because discharges from the GE plant at Glens Falls, N.Y., were producing levels of up to 100 ppm in the fish.

"There will be continued sampling to pinpoint the location and extent of PCB contamination in Connecticut waters," according to David Wiggin, Director of the DOH Environmental Health Division.

Biologist Jones said that the tests will take time to trace the movements of the fish. "It's a beast we can't see till we catch it," he explained.

The state Department of Environmental Protection reports that the PCB levels have already "peaked and dissipated" since Monsanto, the nation's only producer of the substance, voluntarily restricted its sales in 1971 when the dangers became known, and many other industries discontinued use.

In the past 40 years, however, the company has produced over 400,000 tons of the chemical that was widely used in such products as plastics, epoxy glue, lubricants, and inks, and in electrical products. Uses are now restricted to closed-system transformers.

The compound is practically indestructible, which means that the majority of all PCB's ever used remain in the environment from past discharges, or when the products are disposed of.

Currently the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is testing the extent to which PCB's enter the groundwater through landfills or are transported through rainfall due to improper incineration.

"We don't know yet the relation between the sediment and the fish yet, or whether traces of PCB concentrate in the food chain," said DEP's Charles Fredette, who is coordinating statewide tests of the sediment and of freshwater fish in cooperation with DOH.

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