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High PCB Levels Noted in State Fish

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The Associated Press

Chemical pollution may be making some Wisconsin fish unsafe to eat.

High levels of PCB's, or polychlorinated biphenyls, a toxic industrial chemical, are showing up in fish from certain waters, health officials report.

No deaths have yet occurred in Wisconsin from eating fish containing PCBs or any other toxic substance, said Jerry Murdahl, a chemist for the State Department of Agriculture, which moniters foods produced and sold in the state.

But danger exists, warned Dr. James Allen, a University of Wisconsin pathologist.

Daily doses of PCBs over a month of 2.5 parts per million — half the level considered safe for humans — have been fatal to monkeys, Allen said.

Studies indicate up to 30 per cent of all Americans already have detectable levels of PCBs in their bodies, he said.

Because PCB's accumulate in fatty tissue, **"There is a distinct possibility that even at extremely low levels, PCBs may eventually reach a toxic level in man,"** Allen warned.

Allen said the PCB effects observed in monkeys are similar to symptoms reported in 1968 for 1,000 Japanese who accidentally ate PCB-tainted rice oil. The effects included acne, ulcers, jaundice, bloated faces, swollen joints and loss of body hair. Because of PCBs were retained in their fat, the symptoms for many lingered for several years. Babies born to affected women were discolored and smaller than normal.

PCBs, which have been widely used for almost 50 years in numerous industrial products such as insulating and hydraulic fluids, paints, inks and adhesives, have shown up in other foods besides fish, said Donald Healton, regional director of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Four years ago the FDA discovered PCBs in food packaged in paperboard made from recycled carbonless copy paper. More recently, milk from Michigan and Ohio was contaminated when dairy herds were fed feed stored in silos coated with paint containing PCBs, he said.

Fish are the most frequent carriers of the contaminating chemicals Healton said. The FDA earlier this summer destroyed 10 tons of carp valued a $3 million from Lake Pepin and banned commercial fishing along parts of the Mississippi River because of high PCB levels in fish.

Last March the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture blocked the sale of PCB-contaminated carp from a Green Bay fishery. In June, the Department of Natural Resources imposed restrictions on commercial catches from Lake Michigan after PCB concentrations of up to ten times the level considered safe for humans were found in lake trout and salmon.

"There's no doubt these restrictions will have a great impact on the industry, especially along the Mississippi, and the state's economy," said Donald Konsoer of the State Agriculture Department. But he declined to speculate how many millions of dollars fishermen may lose.