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Contaminated fish going to market

Netters take 800,000 pounds of lakers

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Outdoor Editor

Illegal commercial fishing — by Indians and whites — plus an incidental take of 300,000 pounds of "lot trout" from Lake Superior dumped an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 pounds of contaminated lake trout on fish markets in 1975.

John Scott, Department of Natural Resources Great Lakes fisheries specialist, places the illegal catch of lakers from Lakes Michigan and Superior at approximately 800,000 pounds — half of which he estimates exceed contaminant levels. Most fat trout also exceed the limits, he says.

SCOTT SAYS many of the fish are known to be shipped to Chicago, Detroit and New York fish markets — even though they exceed U.S. Food and Drug Administration guidelines for DDT and PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in fish. Some exceed mercury levels, too.

Yet the Department of Agriculture, which concedes "about 25 per cent" of fish tested are above the "actionable" level — the level at which fish may be seized — says it has been unable to uncover any lake trout in intrastate commerce.

George Dahl, DNR Law Enforcement Division chief, suggests that the problem may be that food inspectors aren't at the right place at the right time when midnight transfers are taking place.

AND DR. DONALD Isleib, chief deputy director of the Department of Agriculture, concedes inspectors work five-day, eight-hour shifts and do not necessarily have time — with various other duties — to "stake out" areas and wait for contaminated fish.

Once the fish enter the market — unless there is evidence that they were illegally taken — the DNR is in a "hands off" position. And, in the eastern Upper Peninsula, the DNR knows from experience that it might as well not take any commercial fisherman — Indian or white — to court.

All any commercial fisherman has to do to get a case for illegal possession of fish dismissed is claim that they were purchased from an Indian, says Scott. Dahl says he expects charges against Bill Carlson, Leland commercial fisherman arrested with a load of untagged lake trout, will be dropped because Carlson claims he bought them from Bay de Noc Fisheries, which buys from Indians.

SCOTT SAYS the situation has worsened from 1973, when the four Lake Michigan states estimated 400,000 pounds of lakers were being taken illegally — half in Michigan waters — to a point where the illegal catch is now one-third the sports catch.

Ironically, while about one million pounds of lake trout is being sold through commercial channels, one million pounds of surplus salmon — equally contaminated — has been buried each year since 1970 when Agriculture and the Department of Public Health ordered the DNR — through the governor — to discontinue fish giveaways at state weirs.

"This year one million pounds of salmon was sold, as usual, on a bid basis for their eggs," explains Lad Frankenberger, anadromous fish specialist. "But this year the high bidder made fertilizer out of the carcasses after removing the eggs for fish bait and oil, which contains the DDT and PCBs."

FRANKENBERGER SAYS, ironically, that a 10-pound lake trout and a 10-pound chiboak salmon both

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taken off Manistee contain comparable amounts of contaminants. Coho, which are more migratory, cannot be judged similarly, he says.

Dr. George Whitehead, deputy director of Agriculture, says the Food Inspection Division is investigating but has been unable to come up with contaminated fish in the market. There's a question, he explains, whether the department can move in before the fish exchange hands from Indians, who can operate outside the law, and white purchasers.

"And we're going to have an even greater problem when the new Bay Mills Fish Processing Plant is built," he suggests. "We can't go on the reservation so I don't know who — if anyone — will have jurisdiction to inspect the plant. There's nothing worse than a dirty fish plant."

PART OF the problem is that the Indian fishery has been building up during a period when, in Whitehead's words, " . . . we've been chasing cows around . . ." During the past 18 months the department's laboratories have done 18,000 tests of beef cattle contaminated with PBBs, a fire retardant chemical which got into food and has caused thousands of cattle to be destroyed.

"But we haven't ignored the fish situation," stressed Whitehead. "We just haven't done as good a job as we would like to have done. I didn't realize the magnitude of the lake trout problem."

Both Isleib and Whitehead stress that Agriculture works hand-in-hand with FDA to prevent duplication of effort in inspection of food, stores, bakeries and processing plants. But Agriculture has less than 50 inspectors for all of the stores and food processing plants in the state.

TO COMPLICATE the problem, the Canadian government has lowered its PCB guideline in fish to two parts per million, encouraging commercial fisherman to ship their lake trout to the United States, says Scott. But he questions whether many Canadian fish will meet U.S. standards — even though Whitehead says FDA has "tested so many boxes of Canadian fish that they're satisfied."

Isleib stresses that Agriculture isn't presuming the lake trout from Michigan waters to be "clean." But finding 50 out of 200 fish — the Great Lakes Environmental Contaminant Survey ratio — out of an array so large is difficult.

Whitehead adds, inspectors have difficulty finding fish to sample — the fish aren't necessarily out in counters. And shippers, who are effective, can avoid their shipments past inspection.

"THERE ARE some outgoes in the law which requires us to take a firm, adequate against fish in commerce," says Isleib. "I was raised on the east coast and I am a fish eater by preference. I am personally appalled because smoked chubs are beyond our access."

But the outgoes appears to be the "court of last resort" for sportsfisherman who hope the restoration of lake trout in Lakes Michigan and Superior won't be wiped out by illegal fishing.

While Isleib stresses, "We aren't in the business of regulating fisherman — we can only put sinsures on fish which are contaminated," Agriculture or FDA action could possibly stop the traffic in lake trout.

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