Last for More Than 15 Years

Source of PCBs in Lake Ontario Remains Mystery

By DAVID LEONARD
(Second of two parts).

Although General Electric Corp. has been named by the DEC as a major PCB source on the Hudson River, the source of PCBs in Lake Ontario still remains a mystery.

The sole U.S. manufacturer of PCBs, Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Inc., pledged several years ago to sell PCBs for use only in closed systems. Schweitzer reports that foreign PCB producers are continuing to sell PCBs for other uses.

"It is believed that most of the PCB imports (which exceeded 375,000 pounds in 1974) are not used in closed electrical systems," he said.

But even if production of new PCBs is controlled, the long-life of this chemical makes it necessary for environmental officials to look beyond present purchasers. If PCBs travel to dumps they may leach into bodies of water after a heavy rainfall, for example.

Systems Can Leak

Closed systems can leak. And when closed systems are destroyed, the PCBs have to be destroyed or stored, the DEC spokesman said PCBs last for more than 15 years.

PCBs have been found in many corners of the environment. There have been incidents in which PCBs have been found in food containers such as cereal boxes, in milk—and several years ago, thousands of New York State chickens had to be destroyed because they had eaten contaminated food. The PCBs worked up through the food chain and were found in the chickens at levels above the 5 ppm limit. PCBs are by no means a local issue. They have been found all over the world—even at the antarctic, miles from any known source.

A sampling of alewives from Lake Ontario contained 2.7 ppm on the average. Salmon feed on these fish. Smelt were also found to contain PCBs. They averaged 3.43 ppm according to an unpublished study performed by the Lake Ontario Environmental Laboratory.

Assemblyman John R. Zagame (R-117) is presently gathering information about PCBs. He plans on introducing a bill to deal with the problem.

"I don't think anyone can disagree that PCBs is a serious environmental problem here," said Zagame. "It's a question of how PCBs will be contained."

Zagame hopes that substitutes can be found for most of the PCB uses.

Schweitzer has expressed the need for a 'front end' approach in which possibly toxic chemical might be reviewed before they are used in industry and introduced into the environment.

An EPA report says the federal government will be restricting the discharges of industrial effluents so that the levels of PCBs in rivers or lakes (in the water, not the fish) do not exceed 10 parts per trillion.

Interagency Review

"A water quality criteria level of 1 ppm will soon undergo interagency review prior to final promulgation," said Schweitzer. "The originally proposed level of 2 ppm has been reduced in view of recent ecological effects data."

An EPA study cited in a recent Central New York Environment article showed PCB levels at 77 ppt in the Oswego River. The article said the Oswego River is an apparent major source of PCBs. Other PCB findings were Niagara River, 97 ppt; Hamilton, 49; Toronto, 33; Olcott, 44; Cobourg, 45; Rochester, 40; Deep Hole (Roch.) 56. Immediately after the August announcemnt by the DEC, Oswego's drinking water quality was tested by state officials for PCB content and was determined safe.

One environmental official compared the PCBs issued to the "mercury scare" which occurred several years ago.

And there have been many critics of Commissioner Reid's handling of the PCBs situation. They claim PCBs is being used as a political football.

Some observers have suggested that the state may be purposely raising the PCB and cadmium issues in an effort provide an excuse to cut the Altmar hatchery. The DEC spokesman categorically denied the allegation. "There is nothing to it," he said.

The FDA's 5 ppm limit on PCB content in fish has been called arbitrary by some critics. "They picked the number out of the air," one said. But the FDA has defended the 5 ppm limit as being the best guide, given the information available.

Fisherman's Reaction

The reaction of one local fisherman to the PCBs in salmon issue was typical: "You'd have to eat salmon at every meal for it to hurt you," he said, adding that in laboratory tests, that's what is done.

State health and conservation officials have stressed that there is no health emergency. And for those who will continue to eat salmon the PCB level can be lowered by removing fat strips from the belly and back, according to New York Sea Grant Advisory Service. Cooking procedures which drain the fish's body fluids, like baking and broiling, are recommended. Sea Grant has been recommending the one meal per week rule.

But, as one observer pointed out, the real issue is not salmon or trout. The real issue is that toxic chemicals are finding their way into our environment. And moving a hatchery from one location to another is not likely to solve that.

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