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Albany Plans Hatchery On a Contaminated Lake

By RICHARD SEVERO

New York State is planning to build a $10-million salmon hatchery on Lake Ontario to benefit sports fishermen, even though officials of the Department of Environmental Conservation have been warned for the last year by their own scientists and others that fish from the lake are not safe to eat because of excessive contamination with toxic chemicals, including Mirex.

The department itself acknowledges the danger.

"The levels of Mirex in fish suggest that the amount of Mirex in Lake Ontario has reached unacceptable levels — that it's too high," said Dr. Ted Hullar, a departmental deputy commissioner. "People who would be eating fish should now have an added measure of caution."

Despite this, Dr. Hullar said Tuesday night that the department had not changed any of its plans for building the hatchery. He explained that the department was presuming the contamination would one day disappear. But if it does not, he said, he hopes the hatchery's

First of two articles

facilities could be used to produce fish for bodies of water that are not contaminated.

Mirex is a pesticide that has caused cancer in laboratory animals. Its effect on humans remains unclear, but it is viewed apprehensively. Scien-

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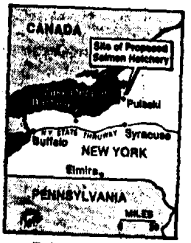
tists have found that, under certain circumstances, Mirex breaks down into the controversial chemical Kepone, which is toxic to wildlife and human reproductive systems and has become the focus of multiple Federal, state and private lawsuits in Virginia.

Kepone has been detected only recently in Lake Ontario fish by researchers for the United States Food and Drug Administration, according to sources there. It remains unclear as to what the levels are or how widespread the Kepone contamination is.

The New York Times, in an investigation based on extensive interviews and examination of scientific data, found evidence of contamination of Lake Ontario fish and wildlife. The investigation also showed that within the Department of Environmental Conservation, there was a lack of knowledge



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and confusion about certain data.

There was also a feeling among some department members that creation of the Ontario fishery should go forward, despite the possible consequences. Millions of salmon have already been stocked in Lake Ontario and Lake Erie in the past few years and are prized by fishermen.

In Washington, a spokesman for the Food and Drug Administration said that last May the agency established an "action level" of 0.1 part per million for Mirex in fish. Fish containing that level or more will be seized if shipped in interstate commerce. There is no commercial salmon fishing in Lake Ontario, although other fish—most notably white perch—are caught commercially. The perch are frequently sent to New York City.

Moreover, in checking the tests done by the Food and Drug Administration between last Sept. 15 and Nov. 25, a wide range of Mirex levels was found, some of them exceeding the "action level."

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monition, it is believed that thousands of salmon will be eaten. But scientists fear that massive damage may be done to the environment, even if the salmon are not eaten.

If the fish are caught and thrown back, they may be eaten by gulls or minks and other animals, and the chemical contaminates would move up the food chain. If the fish are composted and used as fertilizer, the chemicals will enter the earth.

Salmon from the proposed Lake Ontario hatchery in Pulaski, N.Y., would not necessarily start out contaminated. State officials have yet to decide on their source of water supply for the hatchery, but such fresh water hatcheries often use uncontaminated local feeder streams for their water. This means that the young fish would have little or no toxic content until they were removed and stocked in contaminated bodies of water like Lake Ontario.

Ward B. Stone, an associate wildlife pathologist with the state's department, has peppered his superiors with more than two dozen memorandums in the last few months, expressing his dismay over the present salmon-stocking program, the plans to build the hatchery, and the department's failure to learn more about the Mirex problem faster. He has also raised questions about the possible synergistic effect of eating multiple contaminates in a single fish.

"The Lake Ontario salmon program has a dark cloud hanging over it because of the pollutants, and the program may well produce hundreds of thousands of salmon that can't be consumed by humans and which are a threat to the health of wildlife such as mink," he wrote last July 14 to Stuart Free, chief of the Bureau of Wildlife.

"I recommend that the Lake Ontario salmon program be carefully evaluated on the basis of crude Canadian and American toxin data. It is interesting, and sad to note that at least some of the Mirex pollution of Lake Ontario was undoubtedly done under government permit by Hooker Chemical, Niagara Falls, N.Y."

Officials at Hooker, a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum, would neither confirm nor deny Dr. Stone's statement. The company appeared reluctant to say much about what it makes and what might be in its effluent, which is discharged into the Niagara River. The Niagara flows into Lake Ontario.

"Mirex is a hot potato," said Jerry Wilkenfeld, director of environmental health for Hooker, "and we are under strict orders to refer all inquiries to the public relations department."

James Green, Hooker's public relations man, confirmed that the company made Mirex between 1959 and 1967 "on a batch basis" for Allied Chemical, which marketed it.

"We haven't made Mirex since 1967, and we never made it continuously," Mr. Green said. "We haven't even ground it since April of last year."

Mirex is normally ground as part of the preparation process.

Some of the information on Hooker's discharges is contained in Hooker's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit, which is required by Federal law before chemicals are dumped into the river. A copy of it was obtained by The Times.

The permit was issued by the New York regional office of the United States Environmental Protection Agency. The permit allows Hooker to dump a maximum of 950 pounds of unspecified chlorinated hydrocarbons into the river an a given day, with the average set at 250 pounds a day. The maximum is supposed to be reached only on relatively rare occasions.

Chlorinated hydrocarbons are man-made chemicals that include such compounds as PCB's and DDT. They do not readily degrade in the environment, and persist for years. When ingested, they tend to accumulate in the fatty tissue of fish, animals and humans. Taken in small amounts, chlorinated hydrocarbons do not exhibit their toxicky readily, but they have become suspect over the years as a cause of cancer in people.

Mirex is technically classified as an organo-chlorine. There appears to be no provision in the permit for its discharge.

"If you told me it was 950 pounds of chlorinated hydrocarbons a year, I would be shocked," said an E.P.A. scientist, who asked that his name not be used. "To permit anything like this in a single day is incredible. I don't think I have ever seen a permit for this much junk. It has all the makings of a scandal."

Tomorrow: How Lake Ontario, with government authorization, became contaminated.

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New York Is Planning a Hatchery on Lake Ontario

Although the Fish There Are Too Contaminated to Eat

Found in 16 of 17 Samples

Mirex turned up in 16 out of 17 samples. The range was reported from 0.03 chemical, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) at levels of "about 15 to 30 times higher than those reported for Mirex."

The Government researchers, who were looking primarily for PCB's, said their findings on Mirex "can only be considered as approximations."

The Federal researchers noted there were some Canadian studies "which add support to the presumption that a Mirex problem may be developing in Lake Ontario."

The most recent Canadian study, made less than three months ago, suggests that United States researchers were on target last fall and that the Canadians did not equivocate about their data.

The Canadians reported they had found coho salmon in Lake Ontario with both Mirex and PCB levels above the guidelines established by the United States Government.

The mean level in 28 salmon tested was 5.77 parts per million of PCB's (the PCB guideline for fish is 5 parts per million) and 0.231 parts per million of Mirex, more than twice the United States safe standard. Other chemicals found by the Canadians included dieldrin, benezene hexachloride and DDE, a metabolite of DDT. The Canadians did not speculate on where any of the chemicals might have originated.

1,000 Fish Analyzed

The Ontario Ministry of the Environment said that it had analyzed approximately 1,000 fish from various locations in the Great Lakes, but that only fish from Lake Ontario had "measurable Mirex residues."

Other fish species besides salmon found in Lake Ontario and containing Mirex included white bass, yellow perch, brown bullhead, alewife and smelt. One smelt had three times the United States guideline for edibility.

Sports fishermen are expected to take 60,000 salmon from Lake Ontario this year. Commercial fishermen from the United States and Canada, while not after salmon, will probably take about 2.7 million pounds of various fish from Lake Ontario, 2.3 million pounds of it bound for Canadian tables.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation has, as yet, made no formal statement on Mirex to either sports or commercial fishermen, although two weeks ago, shortly after receiving inquiries from a Times reporter, its pace in attempting to delineate the problem quickened.

As of now, all fishermen have been advised is that because of PCB contamination, they should eat no more than one meal of Lake Ontario salmon a week. Pregnant women have been warned not to eat any.

Despite the department's ad-

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