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PCB Pollution Data Challenged

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The state's determination that fish in Long Island Sound contain high levels of PCB pollutants has been challenged by an FDA chemist, who says the testing methods probably inflated the actual concentrations.

The criticism, contained in a Food and Drug Administration internal memorandum, was viewed as good news yesterday by residents of the East End, which could face a crippling ban on much of its fish catch if the state's figures are correct.

Donald Middleton, regional administrator for the State Department of Environmental Conservation, said his agency would conduct tests again this summer. "If our results are in fact higher than they need to be, I am very pleased," he said. But a department spokesman in Albany said the testing methods were checked and appeared to have been sound. State and federal officials are scheduled to meet next week to discuss the testing.

The PCB contamination of Long Island Sound fish was disclosed by Newsday in January, following a 15-month state study. The state found mean concentrations of 2.57 parts per million in bluefish and 3.45 parts per million in striped bass. The current federal limit is five parts per million, but the Food and Drug Administration has proposed lowering the standard to two parts per million. Sources familiar with the situation say the proposed FDA standard probably will become effective in the fall. The East End fishing industry, which leans heavily on the two fish, faces a loss of perhaps $1.5 million annually, and several hundred jobs, according to state estimates.

After reviewing the state tests, Fred M. Gretch, the FDA chemist, noted in a May 25 memo that some of the 116 stripers and bluefish that formed part of the state sample were taken from areas other than eastern Long Island. Some were taken from the Hudson River, which has been heavily contaminated with PCB's contained in discharges by General Electric plants near Albany. A copy of the memo was obtained by Suffolk Legis. Joyce Burland (D-Sagaponack), who disclosed its contents.

Gretch also said the analysis was done with "rather antiquated equipment" and included chemicals found in whole fish, instead of concentrations in only the edible fish portions. In at least one case, he said, 12 fish were ground up and analyzed as a composite.

"It is my opinion," he said, "that the data submitted reflect the fact that there are PCB's in Long Island fish. However, based on my current knowledge of the manner in which these samples were collected, prepared and analyzed, I believe that the results are probably biased on the high side."

PCB's, an acronym for polychlorinated biphenyls, have been used as fire-retardant fluids in electric transformers and capacitors. First produced in 1929, they subsequently were used in a wide variety of materials, including carbonless copy paper, paints, wood and small appliances. They have been shown to cause cancer and nervous disorders in test animals and skin defects in humans at doses of 1,000 parts per million. The federal government this year has banned production of the chemical.

Burland said yesterday: "I feel strongly the [state's] testing was not extensive enough." She said that if additional tests show unacceptably high levels, there will be no choice but to go along with the ban. But, she added, Gretch's letter casts a "bright light" on a potentially damaging situation for the East End economy.