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New threat to Lake Michigan fish

BY DAVID WEITZ
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An industrial pollutant, polychlorinated biphenyls, has contaminated whitefish in Lake Michigan at levels exceeding the same standards as carp in Lake Pepin in western Wisconsin, where United States Food and Drug Administration officials ruled recently that no carp can be sold any longer in interstate commerce for human consumption.

Lake trout and large salmon in Lake Michigan also are expected to be contaminated beyond federal limits for safe consumption, according to state Department of Natural Resources officials.

The polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are now used in transformers and capacitors. Only one American firm, Monsanto, makes the fluids although some foreign product is sold, said Stanley Kleinert, Madison, chief of surveillance for the DNR.

Past industrial uses of PCBs have been in making carbonless copy paper, paints, hydraulic fluids, insulation and heat exchange fluids in the electric industry and in the plastics industry.

Kleinert said tests of 20 whitefish sampled in April showed that some exceed 5 parts per million PCBs.

Carp, commercially fished in Green Bay, are now being tested.

Kleinert said results are not complete but that salmon and lake trout are expected to be affected. "From the work that's been done by the Fish and Wildlife Service of the State of Michigan it's just expected that the larger trout and salmon will exceed the 5 parts per million level."

The larger, fatter fish are more likely to be affected, he said. The PCBs are a chlorinated hydrocarbon and, like DDT, build up in the fatty tissue of fish and animals.

"Your big, old fish that have lots of fat are going to have PCBs," Kleinert said.

Kleinert is preparing a special report to be presented May 21 and 22 to the state Board of Natural Resources. It will deal with the extent of contamination present in the fish and with the possible sources of the PCBs.

In a letter to R.E. Hogue, a Pepin fish broker, Henry P. Roberts, Minneapolis, deputy regional Food and Drug director, said carp taken from the lake contained more than 5 parts per million PCBs. He warned Hogue, who ships fish to New York markets, against interstate sale of the fish.

"Any fish shipped in interstate commerce containing over the 5 parts per million tolerance are considered to be in violation of the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act and can be seized under the law. Also, the shipper of such fish could be liable to injunction or prosecution as prescribed by law."

Hogue returned one shipment of carp from the lake that already had reached New York after being told that the fish could not be legally sold because of contamination.

A similar carp fishery exists in Green Bay.

Ron Poff, Madison, DNR supervisor of commercial fishing, said 3 million pounds of carp were taken last year from Green Bay. The fish sold for about 4 cents per pound. Some 37 million pounds of alewife, selling at less than 2 cents per pound, were taken from Lake Michigan.

But the most commercially valuable fish in the lake, in 1974, were the whitefish and chub. Fishermen netted one million pounds of whitefish with a value of $750,000 and about 1.1 million pounds of chubs with a value of $700,000. Some 700,000 pounds of yellow perch were taken with a value of $350,000.

Poff said that besides PCB contamination some Lake Michigan fish are being contaminated by residues of Dieldren, a pesticide.

The PCB contamination, if at sufficient levels, could seriously affect the commercial fishing in Lake Michigan and might have an impact on sport fishing, according to Poff.

"There are overtones, here, these

Fish . . .

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things could seriously affect the future of these lakes in providing a sport fishery."

Poff said salmon up to two years old apparently meet the federal food standards but that during their last year gain weight rapidly feeding heavily on alewife. The gain of the fish results in a gain in PCBs.

A joint study committee of individuals from the state agriculture department, department of health and DNR are checking the situation to identify the problem, according to Kleinert.

Robert Mars, Minneapolis, Federal Food and Drug Administration compliance officer, said each of the four states bordering Lake Michigan must be involved in action because of PCBs.

He said commercial shippers in interstate commerce could not legally ship fish known to be contaminated with more than 5 parts per million PCBs. Possible federal action, according to Fermer Adsire, Minneapolis, compliance branch chief, is sampling the fish and if contaminated will consider federal court action to cause the shipment to be seized, an injunction to enjoin the fish broker from interstate commerce, or prosecution.

No decision has been made concerning Green Bay by the agency.

"As of today we do not have any data available to us on Green Bay that would permit us to make any comment," said Mars.

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