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Panel urges curb on PCB chemicals

By Bruce Ingersoll

An interstate committee of environmental officials stopped short of recommending a total ban on PCB industrial chemicals, but has concluded that use of them should be drastically curtailed.

Recent research has shown that PCBs can prevent reproduction in fish, birds and mammals, and may have similar effects on humans.

The Lake Michigan Toxic Substances Committee has decided that "many — if not all — uses of PCBs can be eliminated or replaced by alternative compounds," said Karl Bremer, a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official and member of the committee.

Donald Mount, director of the EPA National Water Quality Laboratory in Duluth, has informed higher-ups in the agency that the committee favors restricting PCB use solely to the manufacture of electrical transformers and capacitors.

PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — are used as insulating fluids, plasticizers for paints and adhesives and as fire-resistant electrical fluids.

PCBs may be as ubiquitous as DDT, another main ingredient in the alphabet soup of chemical pollution being watched over by anti-pollution and health officials. These compounds, like DDT, pervade the global environment, are finding their way into lakes and rivers and are accumulating in the fat of fish.

Large lake trout and salmon taken from Lake Michigan have been found to contain as much as 50 parts of PCB per million — 10 times the 5-ppm level that the Food and Drug Administration tolerates for human consumption.

Moreover, PCB-contaminated fish have been caught in the upper Mississippi, Ohio and Hudson rivers as well as the Fox and Milwaukee rivers in Wisconsin, said Gilman Veith, water laboratory. 'Generally, wherever you have industrial concentrations, you will find PCB contamination of fish," Veith said.

In the light of these findings, several steps have been taken as public-health precautions:

- The FDA recently forced a Pepin (Wis.) fish processor to bury 20,000 pounds of PCB-tainted carp fillets after detecting levels as high as 14 ppm. The carp had been netted out of Lake Pepin, a broad reach of the Mississippi downstream from Minneapolis and St. Paul.
- Minnesota health officials advised sports fishermen to eat fish out of the upper Mississippi only once a week.
- Wisconsin health officials urged the public to limit to once a week the consumption of large salmon and trout (over 24 inches long) from Lake Michigan and Green Bay, and all fish from a 60-mile stretch of the Mississippi from Prescott, Wis., to lower Lake Pepin and a 12-mile stretch of the Fox River near Portage, Wis. Children and pregnant women were cautioned to eat only one portion a week.
- The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture announced plans to seize any commercial fish containing more than 5 ppm.
- Michigan environmental officials urged the Michigan Legislature and Congress to outlaw the use of PCBs.
- Illinois health and environmental officials are studying the entire PCB problem but have not yet decided on any course of action, said Anthony Dean, director of conservation.

Monsanto Chemical Co., the sole American manufacturer of PCBs, has voluntarily cut back on PCB sales since 1970. The chemicals, however, are still widely produced in Europe and Japan.

Despite the drop in Monsanto's production, PCBs in Lake Michigan and other bodies of water have not decreased appreciably in the past five years.

Dow Chemical Co. is attempting to develop a substitute chemical that has the industrial advantages of PCBs but not their ecological disadvantages.

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