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Mysterious die-off continues

PCB's suspected of killing Atlantics

Michigan's experimental attempt to establish Atlantic salmon in the Great Lakes may fail due to high levels of PCB's.

Atlantic salmon entering the Au Sable and Boyne Rivers to spawn in the last few weeks are dying of the same unidentified cause as last year, Dept. of Natural Resources biologists report. About half of the fish captured by the DNR from the Boyne have died and the others are sick, Gaylord district fish chief Steve Swan reports.

Last year, the dead fish were sent to state and federal laboratories, but no explanation could be found for their dying. The fish in both rivers have red spots and rapidly turn dark and then die. They have the red spots when they first enter the rivers.

Last year biologists theorized that the Boyne and Au Sable are too warm in June and July, when the majority of the fish return. To assure the Atlantics cool water, an eight-inch well, pumping 800 gallons a minute, was drilled below the dam on the Boyne.

This 50-degree water flows into a holding pond into which the salmon are placed when they reach the dam. Some of the fish are also taken to a cold-water holding pond at the Oden fish hatchery.

Swan says the cold water has not prevented the fish from dying, like they did last year.

He is still convinced the cause is environmental stress and suspects it may be PCB's (polychlorinated biphenyls). But adds that lab tests proving the fish have high quantities of PCB's will not prove that it is what is killing them.

Other fish in the Great Lakes have been found to have as much as 40 parts per million PCB's. Some of these fish are unable to reproduce, but no evidence has been found that they are killed by the PCB's.

Swan suspects that the Atlantics are more sensitive to environmental stresses, which could explain their being killed by PCB's while other fish survive. But, he adds, biologists may never know positively what is killing the Atlantics.

"It is too early to scrap the whole program," Swan insists.

The unexplained die-off of Atlantics at Wolf Lake fish hatchery this winter and the continued dying of wild fish will have to be cleared up in another couple years if the state hopes to salvage it's Atlantic salmon hopes.

The possibility of reducing PCB contamination in the big lakes in a few years is pretty slim, scientists say. They point out that PCB's are thought to be far more persistent than DDT, which has been substantially reduced since it's use was banned.

Michigan's Natural Resources Commission has called for a complete, nationwide, ban on PCB's, as have other agencies and scientists concerned about the environment.