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FDA In Snafu Over PCB

The Department of Natural Resources on Feb. 14 confirmed that levels of the chemical polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) have not increased in Lake Michigan chubs, coho, salmon, and lake trout during recent months.

Earlier last month, the federal Food and Drug Administration reported that it was considering an interstate marketing ban on the fish because it believed PCB levels in the three species to be "dangerously" higher than its tolerance limit of 5 parts per million (ppm).

At the time of the FDA statement, DNR Director Howard A. Tanner expressed surprise and seriously questioned the accuracy

of the federal assessment.

In investigating the matter, the DNR gained information which indicates that the FDA statement may have originated from a report made on Jan. 30 by Donald Heulton, the federal agency's regional director in Chicago.

On that date, Heulton said "the most complete survey of PCB levels in Lake Michigan which I have seen is the one reported by the Great Lakes Environmental Contaminants Survey (GLECS)."

The GLECS study is being conducted jointly by the Michigan DNR, the State Department of Agriculture, the FDA's district office in Detroit, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service laboratory in Ann Arbor.

Information from the survey, upon which Heulton apparently based his assessment, has been available for nearly a year.

"There is nothing in this study which justifies the recent FDA statement," stresses Tanner.

In reviewing the matter with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service laboratory in Ann Arbor Feb. 12, the DNR confirmed that studies there show no significant change in PCB levels in Lake Michigan chubs from 1972 through 1974.

The Michigan Department of Agriculture tested coho salmon last fall from Lake Michigan and cleared some of the fish for human consumption in this state. Large quantities of coho from the lake were shipped last fall with FDA knowledge for processing and sale through an Oregon cannery.

Preliminary studies by the Michigan Department of Public Health to date have failed to reveal any correlation between health symptoms and PCB levels among people regularly eating Lake Michigan fish. That Department's PCB studies, funded by the FDA, are scheduled for completion later this year.

Tanner notes:

"We know there are certain Lake Michigan fish species, particularly larger specimens, which still exceed the FDA's temporary tolerance level of 5 ppm. We have been concerned about the environmental and human health implications of PCB's since 1971.

"We would agree with Director Heulton's statement that 'we must prevent or drastically reduce discharges of PCB's into the lakes.' We do need to jointly find a solution to this problem; however, statements like the one issued by the FDA this week only confuse the public and create undue hardships on our commercial and recreational fishing industries."