Chemical Content Too High in Lake Pepin Area

FDA Bans Shipment of Carp

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PEPIN — A truckload of Mississippi River fish which probably contains an unsafe level of the harmful chemical polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) was unloaded in New York City today.

The shipment from Pepin Fisheries, 80 miles south of the Twin Cities, was part of an ironic situation in which the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has banned interstate shipment of one kind of carp from a 40-mile section of the Mississippi while permitting the marketing of other kinds of fish which are closely related or have similar feeding habits.

Most authorities agree that the high level of PCB probably exists in all fish taken from the Lake Pepin area of the Mississippi but they contend that the fish should not be harmful if consumed only occasionally.

The source of the pollution is unknown and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is conducting a search for it from the Twin Cities south to Lake Pepin, a 30-mile long, three-mile wide section of the Mississippi.

Authorities said they believe the source is either a plasticizer manufacturer or an electrical transformer coolant operation. They said it is not likely to be a fertilizer as some believe. Wherever it is coming from, it is resulting in as much as 25 parts per million of PCB and the FDA's allowed level is only 5 ppm.

The high flood water in the region (nine feet above normal) this spring may well have a relationship to the situation, as native fishermen in the area said they noticed a foul odor to game fish caught recently. Many of the native fishermen are themselves not eating any fish from that area of the river. One veteran commercial fisherman said the FDA's restriction on carp "is only because the government hasn't made any studies of the others yet. The fish are all the same."

A Minnesota Department of Natural Resources spokesman said that the layman's opinion is probably true and an FDA official implied the same thing.

"I would say that gamefish probably are not harmful unless they are eaten as a constant part of one's diet," said Bruce Hawkinson of the Lake City, Minn., office of the Minnesota DNR. "But we're going to be looking into it carefully."

"We have proof that carp from Lake Pepin contain a certain

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level of PCB," said George Goers of the Minneapolis FDA office. "We are not alarmed about the other species yet, until we have evidence and that takes time. You have to catch the fish, have them analyzed and so on."

While the big commercial catches from the Lake Pepin area are common carp and the FDA restriction has seriously curtailed the district's commercial fishing, the agency still is allowing marketing of buffalo carp, sheepshead, catfish and eels.

"Carp are bottom feeders," Goers said, and added: "Although catfish are, too, for that matter."

Pepin Fisheries at Pepin, operated by Rudolph Hogue, is the lake's only commercial market. Hogue normally ships two or more semi-truck loads of the fish packed in ice to New York City each Thursday or Friday. Over the weekend, he sent only one truckload, containing mostly buffalo carp and catfish.

When the FDA declared its restriction nearly two weeks ago, Hogue voluntarily buried 60,000 pounds of carp. The FDA said it would have seized the fish had he tried to ship them.

Commercial fishermen get most of the carp and buffalo carp in nets and catch the catfish on long setlines containing as many as 100 separately baited hooks. They are paid from 2 to 4 cents a pound for carp at the market and about 80 cents a pound for the catfish. Catfish in supermarkets cost the consumer from $1.50 to $2 per pound.

One source said the FDA may be reluctant to crack down on shipment of catfish because of the current high price. Area fishermen are upset as it is and the Minnesota DNR held a meeting in Wabasha, Minn., Tuesday night for them to vent their anger.

The FDA restriction applies only to fish caught in the Mississippi from the Alma Dam in Buffalo County north in Red Wing, Minn., at the upper end of Lake Pepin.

The fishermen themselves are asking two questions concerning the FDA regulations, neither of which have very convincing answers, they say. One is why are the fish contaminated only north of the Alma Dam? The water spills freely through the dam and a Corps of Engineers lock accommodating large river boats.

"Presumably Lake Pepin, as it is a very wide body of water, acts as a sort of sump," Goers said. "We do have information that the PCB content in fish south of Alma is at a much lower level."

The other question raised is how the fish market knows where fish it receives are caught.

"Buzz (Hogue) usually knows where you're fishing," said a market employee. If your carp are from Pepin, you can't sell them here. The other kinds are OK, but not carp."

The next area fish market is at Winona, Minn., about 35 miles south of Lake Pepin. It is known that at least a few fishermen from the Pepin area are taking their fish to Winona. They have been doing it for years, claiming that service is too slow at the Pepin market.

Lt. Gov. Martin J. Schreiber said last week that PCB is threatening several Wisconsin waters, including Lake Pepin, the Upper Mississippi River, the Fox River and Lake Michigan. He warned against lowering the safety guidelines as is being considered by some officials.