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Chemical pollution threatens state's fish

MADISON (AP) — Chemical pollution may be making some Wisconsin fish unsafe to eat.

High levels of LECO, or polychlorinated biphenyls, a toxic industrial chemical, are showing up in fish from certain waters, health officials report.

No deaths have yet occurred in Wisconsin from eating fish containing PCBs or any other toxic substance, said Jerry Murdoch, a chemist for the State Department of Agriculture, which monitors foods produced and sold in the state.

But danger exists, warned Dr. James Allen, a University of Wisconsin pathologist.

Daily dosses of PCBs over a month of 2.5 parts per million— half the level considered safe for humans—have been fatal to monkeys, Allen said.

Studies indicate up to 30 per cent of all Americans already have detectable levels of PCBs in their bodies, he said.

Because PCBs accumulate in fatty tissue, "There is a distinct possibility that even at extremely low levels, PCBs may eventually reach a toxic level in man," Allen warned.

Allen said the PCB effects observed in monkeys are similar to symptoms reported in 1969 for 1,000 Japanese who accidentally ate PCB-tainted rice oil. The effects included acne, ulcers, jaundice, bleeded faces, swollen joints and loss of body hair. Because the PCBs were retained in their fat, the symptoms for many lingered for several years. Babies born to affected women were discolored and smaller than normal.

PCBs, which have been widely used for almost 50 years in numerous industrial products such as insulating and hydraulic fluids, paints, inks and adhesives, have shown up in other foods besides fish, said Donald Hanlon, regional director of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Four years ago the FDA discovered PCBs in food packaged in paperboard made from recycled carbonless copy paper. More recently, milk from Michigan and Ohio was contaminated when dairy herds are feed stored in silos coated with paint containing PCBs, he said.

Fish are the most frequent carriers of the contaminating chemicals Hanlon said. The FDA earlier this summer destroyed 10 tons of carp valued at $8 million from Lake Pepin and banned commercial fishing along parts of the Mississippi River because of high PCB levels in fish.

Last March the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture blocked the sale of PCB-contaminated carp from a Green Bay fishery. In June, the Department of Natural Resources imposed restrictions on commercial catches from Lake Michigan after PCB concentrations of up to ten times the level considered safe for humans were found in lake trout and salmon.

"There's no doubt these restrictions will have a great impact on the industry, especially along the Mississippi, and the state's economy," said Donald Kenneer of the State Agriculture Department. But he declined to speculate how many millions of dollars fisheries may lose.

Meanwhile, the DNR has updated its 1971 warning to anglers not to eat more than one fish per week from the Great Lakes and certain inland streams, including the Wisconsin and Fox Rivers.

The source and extent of the PCB pollution is not known, although paper recycling mills and waste treatment plants are prime suspects. Some scientists speculate PCBS are vaporized and incinerated into the air and outer rivers and lakes as fallout and runoff. Once there, PCBS tend to resist biological degradation.

The Wisconsin Natural Resources Board has yet to act on the PCB problem, although the DNR has stepped up its monitoring and surveillance efforts. In the meantime, Michigan and Minnesota, which are having similar problems with the chemical, have called for a federal ban on sales of PCBS except for essential uses.

Greater controls have all but eliminated problems with other toxic chemicals which had contaminated Wisconsin's fish in the past, and the same could be done with PCBS, State Health Officer Dr. George Handy said.

DDT, for instance, has been replaced with pesticides which do not leave residues, he said.

Mercury also has been downgraded as a health hazard after industries were ordered to cut-back dumping of the chemical in state rivers and streams, though fish from the Wisconsin River still contain levels above the safe maximum for humans, Handy said.

Handy fears that PCBS may be the first of many industrial chemical killers lurking in the environment, waiting to be covered.

"There are numerous other chemical agents out there which haven't even begun to hear about yet," Handy said. "I wonder will show up next."

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