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DNR Calls for Legislation Against Polluting Chemical

LANSING (UPI) — The Department of Natural Resources says it cannot stop the pollution of the state's waters by the toxic industrial chemical PCB without legislation severely curtailing its use.

"I think the bill is needed very badly," John L. Hesse, the DNR toxic materials specialist, said Tuesday. "The releases to the environment are believed to be widespread still at this time. We have no way of stopping it without legislation."

Polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), a widely used chemical in industry as well as household goods, has been found in alarming levels in several species of Lake Michigan fish, Hesse said.

The U.S. Feed and Drug Administration has confiscated some shipments of Lake Michigan salmon because of high PCB levels. The chemical also has been cited as causing deaths and reproductive failures in mink and fish-eating birds.

Hesse told the House Marine Affairs Committee that the DNR has been unable to bring about a reduction in PCB contamination levels in recent years even though the sole U.S. producer, Monsanto Chemical Co. of St. Louis, Mo., has sharply curtailed its sale of the substance.

There currently are no laws or guidelines governing the discharge of PCB from factories. Many companies, faced with inadequate disposal facilities, are dumping the chemical or disposing of it in an unsafe fashion, Hesse said.

"The 'search and destroy' method has obviously been ineffective at greatly reducing the PCB inputs to Lake Michigan," Hesse said. "Telephone surveys still showed a wide variety of products and processes containing PCBs despite voluntary measures of Monsanto to restrict sales to closed electrical applications only.

"Importation and black market appeared to be playing a significant role," he said.

The Natural Resources Commission has called for a nationwide ban on the use of PCB and the Michigan Environmental Review Board is preparing recommendations to the governor calling for restrictions on its use.

The Marine Affairs Committee is considering legislation that would phase out the use of PCB over a three-year period, with the exception of electrical transformers and capacitors.

Comittee Chairman David Bonior, D-Mount Clemens, the measure's sponsor, said the panel would hold one more public hearing before clearing it for House action.

PCB, a virtually indestructible compound, is related to polybrominated biphenyl (PBB) which was accidentally mixed inwith livestock feed in 1973 and 1974 forcing the destruction so far of more than 26,000 cattle, sheep and hogs.

Other uses of PCB include hydraulic fluids, adhesives, lamination for metals and ceramics, textile coverings, waterproofing, varnishes and paints.