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Katie's COLUMN

Both Wisconsin's commercial fishing industry, as well as its reputation as a good recreational fishing state stand threatened with serious declines.

Toxic industrial chemicals commonly referred to as "PCB's," or polychlorinated biphenyls, have been found in certain fish in Green Bay, Lake Michigan and the Upper Mississippi River in such high levels that they exceed U.S. Food and Drug Administration tolerance levels. As a result, commercial fishing licenses are no longer being issued on these waters, where the PCB content is high, because the fish taken from these areas pose a serious threat to human health. PCB's, when they accumulate to a certain level in the human body, are believed to cause cancer. Recreational fishermen on these waters have been also warned not to consume fish from these waters on a regular basis.

The source of PCB's in Wisconsin's waters today is commonly traced to mills which recycle waste papers. Although the paper industry reportedly no longer uses PCB's, those found in wastepapers today come primarily from carbonless copy papers which were produced prior to 1972. Carbonless copy papers were widely used in forms and continue to enter the wastepaper market as old files are discarded and old supplies are used up.

Since 1972, the Monsanto Chemical Company, the only manufacturer of PCB's in the U.S., has voluntarily limited its sale for use in electrical transformers and capacitators for fluorescent lighting fixtures. Early this year Monsanto announced its plans to phase out PCB manufacture altogether. However, Monsanto has not set a final date for its phase-out, and at the present time there are no U.S. regulations to prohibit the importation of PCB's once this phase-out is complete.

Legislation to ban the sale, use and manufacture of PCB's has been recently introduced into the State Assembly at the request of the Natural Resources Board. Under this proposal, Assembly Bill 1342, the ban would take effect February 1, 1977.

Although most would agree that it is imperative that we remove all sources of PCB's and thus prevent their entering our environment, and especially the food chain, there are some problems with this legislation. First, it has been suggested that in order to place a total ban on PCB's entering our waters, waste paper recycling in this state would have to grind to a halt for a period of several years--long enough for the carbonless copy waste paper to disappear from the waste paper market and be disposed of in other ways. Apparently it would be next to impossible for wastepaper mills to separate this PCB source out.

A second problem which has been discussed is that a ban on PCB sales and manufacture in Wisconsin would do nothing to prevent the PCB discharge of other neighboring states from entering into our common waters. Certainly a national ban on PCB's sale, use, manufacture, and importation would be more effective.

Like many environmental pollution problems, there is no simple solution to lower the dangerous levels of PCB's in our environment. Certain trade-offs and value judgements will have to be made.

Whether or not a ban on PCB's is feasible in Wisconsin is yet to be decided. Regardless of the outcome this year, public attention and awareness must be drawn to this environmental health hazard.