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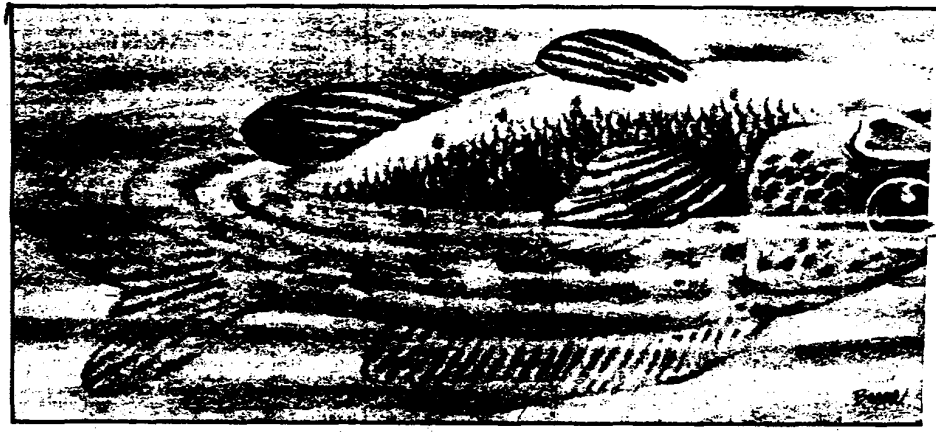

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Pollution task force recommends discontinuance of PCBs

By STEVE VOELLER

The manufacture and use of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) should be discontinued, according to recommendations from an interagency pollution task force.

The test data, released in February by the task force, led the Minnesota Health Department—one of the agencies in the task force—to issue an advisory on the safety of eating fish from the Mississippi River.

The task force, composed of representatives from Minnesota, Wisconsin and federal agencies, was established to measure the extent of PCB pollution in the upper Mississippi.

PCBs are a class of organic compounds. They have been used in hydraulic fluids, sealants, paints and other products. More than 40 million pounds of PCBs were produced in 1974, most of which were sold in this country.

Monsanto Corp., the only domestic manufacturer of the products, cut back the use of PCBs in 1971. They now are used primarily in electrical products, such as transformers and capacitors.

PCBs are feared as pollutants because they remain in the environment without degrading and because they tend to accumulate in the fatty tissue of organisms that consume them—including humans.

PCBs are toxic to humans. Skin diseases have been linked to exposure to PCBs, and experimental rhesus monkeys exposed to the chemicals developed reproductive abnormalities.

Besides recommending an end to PCB production, the task force suggested an air sampling program be initiated to determine if PCBs are being transported by air and whether PCBs in the air might be polluting the river.

The group also said dredging materials should be closely monitored to see if dredging may be suspending PCBs in the water.

Concern over PCB pollution in the Mississippi grew, in 1975, when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) halted interstate shipment of carp from Lake Pepin. About 20,000 pounds of carp fillets were found to contain excessive levels of PCBs, so the fish were destroyed. Levels of PCBs in the fish exceeded the FDA's "action level" of PCB contamination.

At the same time, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources reported high levels of PCBs in fish taken from the upper Mississippi River, and the task force subsequently was created.

When the results of tests were determined in February, the state health department decided the problem was serious enough to issue a warning against consumption of certain species.

The agency said rough fish, white bass and large walleyes taken from the Mississippi below the St. Anthony Falls Dam should not be eaten more than once a week.

Smaller walleyes and other game fish tested did not have high PCB levels, the task force report said, because older fish and fish with large fat content tend to have higher levels of PCBs.

The health department also advised that certain species of fish caught in the Minnesota River south of New Ulm not be eaten more than once a week.

The task force searched for sources of PCB pollution in the Mississippi but were unable to identify a major source, and the group concluded the present problem resulted in part from past use of the chemicals. The task force said, however, that the "myriad of small inputs" caused by current use of PCBs only worsens the situation.