SOMERSET MESSENGER
GAZETTE
SOMERVILLE, N.J.
W. 14,000

SEP 2 8 1975

One more worry: PCBs

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a sampling program and is providing technical assistance to N.J.'s fish and game laboratories for their program.

Sampling is already being done on the Jersey side of the Hudson River, the Raritan Bay and the Manasquan River with personnel from the state's Nakot Creek Research Station in Absecon. Some fish samples are enroute to Trenton for PCB analysis, a tricky and time-consuming process, Librizzi said.

To test for PCBs, the fish have to be cut up in certain areas where the chemical accumulates, particularly in the eggs and fatty underbellies. These parts are homogenized and treated with chemical extractants before being run through a gas chromatograph to analyze the chemical makeup, he said. Results from the first samples could take a few weeks to develop, according to Pyle, but they should be made public within a month.

Present studies show that the maximum allowable limit of PCB contamination is five parts per million, a figure used by the FDA as a standard for marketable fish intended for human consumption. Some species of fish, especially those with higher fat content, are more susceptible to the PCBs, according to the FDA. These include eels and bass, but any seafood may contain PCBs.

If any N.J. fish species is found to be contaminated beyond acceptable levels, the FDA can issue a public warning, as it did in New York, against consumption. It is also empowered to seize shipments of tainted fish or halt commercial fishing in a highly contaminated area.

Another problem with PCBs is that they do not dissolve in water but settle to the bottom, where they are consumed by bottom-feeding species of fish, the FDA warned. A study is being conducted to determine which species are most vulnerable to PCBs.

PCBs won't kill you right away, officials agree. You don't eat a fish and fall over dead, said FDA spokesman Warner. The poisonous effects take time to develop as PCBs build up, and these may be delayed by limiting consumption of certain fish. But PCB effects are still under study, and research has shown that it may cause liver cancer and skin diseases in mink, rats and chimpanzees.

Another area the FDA is looking into is tracing the sources of PCB pollution. The major manufacturer of the chemical in the U.S. is Monsanto, which sells it to other companies for such uses as coding electronic components. General Electric, New York's recent target, is a major purchaser of the chemical. FDA agents will track down shipping orders and try to find out which firms in the metropolitan area are using PCBs, a momentous task involving considerable detective work. The EPA will be working closely with the FDA in pinpointing pollution sources.

"We have no idea how bad it is in New Jersey yet," said Linrizzi of the EPA Edison division. He noted that the recent efforts at coordinating state and federal efforts may be a first, adding that in the past environmental problems were frequently handled by several agencies with most efforts sadly duplicated.

"We're together in this area," he said.