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Lower PCB levels feared dangerous to commercial fis

NEW YORK — The proposed federal regulations that would lower the tolerances of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) permitted in foods involved in interstate commerce would clearly hurt the commercial fishing industry.

The proposals were published in the Federal Register April 1 of this year, and the deadline for comment on them is May 31. PCBs are a fire-resistant liquid now used mainly as insulating fluids in electrical equipment, including transformers and capacitors. Among the effects of PCBs on humans are skin discolorations, swelling of the eyes, liver disease, retarded infant growth and even fetal death. In high concentrations — much higher than those known to affect humans adversely — PCBs may adversely affect fish reproduction.

Testing fish or meat for PCBs is a complicated process involving gas chromatography. Each sample involves about five man hours. The cost of testing each sample is estimated at from $100 to $125 and the procedure takes five days to complete. New York state appears to be the leader, at least on the East Coast, in PCB testing, and it has found high concentrations of PCBs in various fishes in some of its lakes, streams and marine waters.

In the Hudson River, PCB tests of 107 striped bass revealed an average of a little over 8 parts per million (ppm) and 65 Long Island Sound striped bass averaged 3.45 ppm. Long Island Sound bluefish, 51 of them, averaged 2.57 ppm. The contamination of bluefish seems rather surprising, for they spend a good part of their lives in the open ocean presumable far from the PCB-using manufacturing plants. But young bluefish, or snappers, which are spawned in the ocean, move inshore to nursery areas to feed and grow, and the bluefish is also a wanderer, moving all the way along the coast from Maine to Florida. Although the Hudson is a major source of PCB contamination, there are other regions along the East Coast similarly defiled.

Long Island bluefin tuna tested by New York state averaged 2.75 ppm, and weakfish 1.21 ppm, but cod, porgies, fluke, flounder, blackfish and mackerel were below 1 ppm.

Oily fish tend to concentrate PCBs in their bodies, and the common American eel, a catadomous fish that spends most of its life in fresh water, is a notable example of this. Hudson River eels should not be eaten.

PCBs may be taken in by fish through their gills and through the food chain, and certain bottom-feeding fish also gather up large quantities of PCB-laden sediment.

It is somewhat ironic, but the anadromous striped bass, which some people feel is in danger of being overfished, may benefit from the new regulation if it becomes law. Last year 2,450,000 pounds of striped bass were handled by Fulton Fish Market, which represents about 80 per cent of the total East Coast landings of the species, and most of those fish were involved in interstate commerce, being trucked in from as far away as Georgia and Massachusetts.

The proposed new federal regulation would not, of course, affect in-state sales, although Connecticut, which does not permit the sale of stripers caught in its waters could have a problem.

Connecticut has done some PCB testing of fish. Of 19 striped bass examined last year, only five were above 2 ppm and only one of those was above 5 ppm. The size of striped bass being tested is critical, by the way. A 30 pound striper could be nearly 30 years old. The older the fish, the more chance it has to accumulate PCBs.

Commercial fishermen — and sportfishermen — who sell their catch locally or in-state could continue to do this under the proposed new regulations. Nor would the regulations affect sportfishing itself except to the extent that it would tend to dissuade people from eating such species as stripers and bluefish.

Presently New York state is recommending that one eat striped bass from the Hudson River only once a week and that pregnant women and children under 12 refrain from stripers altogether.

The Monsanto Chemical Co. of St. Louis, Mo., is the sole United States manufacturer of PCBs. In 1972 Monsanto announced it would produce PCBs only for use in closed circuit systems where they could not readily enter the environment. (PCBs had been used in the production of many things, including paint and so-called "carbonless" carbon paper.) Monsanto also said it would suspend production of PCBs when a suitable substitute was found. The ideal substitute has not been found, but Monsanto is voluntarily ending all production of PCBs this coming October.

Some PCBs are still being imported into this country for use in closed circuit systems, but under the toxic substances control act, which became effective in January of 1977, it will be illegal in the United States to "process or distribute" PCBs by June of 1979. The same act also bans U.S. production of the substance, effective Jan. 1, 1979.

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