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PCB level declines in Mississippi River

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By Tom Lawin

HUDSON — Minnesota-Wisconsin Boundary Area Commission members learned here Thursday that while the level of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the Mississippi River is down considerably from record high levels two months ago, the danger of eating fish from certain river waters is not reduced because the chemical is stored in fish for their lifetimes.

The commission, following a long discussion on the recently revived PCB problem, particularly in the Lake Pepin area, agreed to urge Gov. Patrick Lucey and Minnesota Governor Wendall Anderson to assure departments of natural resources in both states have sufficient staffs to monitor PCB levels in the Mississippi river.

The recommendation was made at the commission's regular meeting here and followed an order by the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) three weeks ago which condemned several tons of carp taken from Lake Pepin because PCB levels exceeded federal limits of five parts per million.

And just last week the Minnesota Dept. of Natural Resources advised persons living along Lake Pepin to eat walleye pike no more than once a week because FDA said tests show the PCB level in walleyes far exceeded that in carp.

Boundary Area commissioners discussed the PCB problem in the river and urged Lucey and Anderson to permit DNR staffs in both states to "tell the public like it is," regarding PCB.

James Harrison, MWBAC executive secretary, said "we must find out the source of PCB pollution of the river and in order to do it all state and federal agencies that have some jurisdiction in the matter must provide the staff to do the job."

Willis Mattison, of the Rochester, Minn. office of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA) told members of the commission that the level of PCBs in the Mississippi River is down considerably from levels of two months ago. Tests on May 16, he said, showed "very low levels" of the chemical between the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and the foot of Lake Pepin. Readings, according to Mattison, were at record high levels in mid-March and prompted the federal government to ban the interstate shipment of commercial fish (carp) from Lake Pepin.

Stored for life

Mattison also said the chemical is stored in the fish for their lifetime and the exposure at high levels of PCB would present a long-term problem. In fact, he said that because of harmful effects of PCBs on laboratory animals (they failed to reproduce when exposed to high levels) the federal limits of 5 ppm in fish flesh may be too high.

The fluctuating levels of PCBs indicated that the pollution is coming from one major source, rather than a number of small polluters, according to Mattison. He did say that the source is not the huge 3M Co. as many persons have suspected.

PCBs are extremely durable, commissoners were told.

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