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Coho capital's harbor most-polluted

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The world's self-proclaimed coho salmon fishing capital has earned itself another distinction: It is also one of the worst-contaminated harbors in the United States. PCB contamination in the Waukegan, Ill., harbor — deposited by an outboard motor manufacturer — has created hazards to swimmers and commercial fishermen, and the cost of the cleanup may run as high as $30 million, reports Paul Choitz, a Philadelphia-based freelance writer specializing in environmental issues.

By PAUL CHOITZ
Pacific News Service

WAUKEGAN, Ill. — Every day, charter fishing boats drone out from this self-proclaimed "coho fishing capital of the world" in search of trout and coho salmon.

Dozens of children and adults sit placidly along the breakwater, angling for perch. It is a scene typical of the many small harbor towns along the Lake Michigan shore.

Nowhere is there a hint that this is the most severely contaminated harbor in the United States — possibly even the world.

Waukegan harbor and a nearby waterway are contaminated with an estimated 2 million pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a highly toxic industrial compound believed to be both carcinogenic and mutagenic. It is estimated that there is 10 times as much of the compound in the Waukegan area as in all Lake Michigan combined.

Although nearby Outboard Marine Corporation, the maker of Johnson and Evinrude outboard engines, admits responsibility for the discharge, it is unlikely the mess will be cleaned up soon. Court cases surrounding the discharge continue to proliferate wildly.

The irony of the situation has not been lost on the area's commercial fishermen. They "feel like they are getting it backwards and forwards," says Larry Kamer of the Lake Michigan Federation, a Chicago-based environmental group. "They are paying for these engines and using them for fish contaminated by the people who sold them the engines."

Just north of Outboard Marine's engine casting plant on the harbor's edge, a ditch runs its 2,500-foot course into Lake Michigan. Regarded as a navigable waterway by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, this ditch is so fouled by Outboard Marine's discharge that the agency considers it "an open dump of a highly toxic and persistent chemicals." In some places, PCBs make up as much as one quarter of the bottom sediments.

"It's basically mud and PCBs with a little water mixed in," one EPA official said.

Outboard Marine's chief attorney, Hugh Thomas, claims the company didn't even know it had been using PCBs for 18 years. In 1976, the Illinois EPA confronted the company with studies showing extremely high concentrations of the substance in the harbor and ditch.

In the late 1950s, Outboard Marine had begun to purchase a PCB-containing hydraulic fluid from Monsanto Co. for use in the 128 die-casting machines at the Waukegan plant. By the mid-sixties, however, PCBs began to look like another "wonder chemical" gone bad. For decades, uses of PCBs in thousands of products made the substance so widespread that scientists began discovering it in everything from polar ice to mother's milk.

By the 1970s, enough had been learned about the hazards and persistence of the chemicals that all production and sale was prohibited in the United States. Monsanto then restricted its sale of the compound, and, in 1972, switched Outboard Marine over to a non-PCB formula.

After discovery of the extensive contamination on the harbor floor in 1976, government agencies and Outboard Marine officials negotiated in an attempt to clean up the mess. But cooperation fell apart. Outboard Marine moved the negotiation to the courtroom by filing suit against the state and federal EPAs, asking that the agencies be ordered to study the extent of the contamination and decide what — if anything — could be done. The U.S. EPA countered with a suit demanding that Outboard Marine perform the expensive research, and if necessary, remove and dispose of the contaminated sediment.

"We don't feel the taxpayers should be responsible for paying for a horrendous mess which was created by a private corporation which profited from dumping their garbage into the lake," EPA attorney George Phelus said.

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Other suits and countersuits were filed, and now there are signs that an out-of-court settlement may be pending.

No matter who wins, the cost and scale of the cleanup will be staggering. Costs range from $5 million to $30 million. And since dredging could stir sediment — and PCBs — it is feared such an action could result in even greater contamination of the lake.

The dredged mud would also be considered a hazardous waste, requiring disposal in an approved site. Ony two sites are presently large enough to handle the thousands of semi-trailer truck loads — in Georgia and Arizona.

Meanwhile, life around the harbor goes on.

The Waukegan municipal beach is sandwiched between the north ditch and the harbor entrance. According to one lifeguard, as many as 10,000 people splash in its waters on a hot day. Cutting through the northern edge of this beach is a small stream called outfall 007. It also carries water from Outboard Marine's plant, and studies show PCBs contaminate its sediments. A dilapidated snow fence and a "No Trespassing" sign cover half of 007.

"We do tell people if see little kids floating in there," said the lifeguard. "We ask them to get out, or they might get a rash or something." Farther north along the beach, the waters of the north ditch flow unrestricted into the lake, without fence or warning.

"I was very surprised that there were no signs posted near these outfalls, to not walk in the water or play around there," said Kamer. His environmental group would like to see a cleanup of the harbor first, and a decision on responsibiity later.

"All you have to do is take a stick and poke it in the mud (in the north ditch) and watch what comes out — it's like striking oil."

Kamer also notes that the emergency intake for the city of Waukegan is inside the harbor.

But the major health hazard is not from the water or sediments, but from the possibility of the habor's PCBs boosting the already-high PCB concentrations in the lake's fish. Since PCBs concentrate in the fatty tissue of fish, the levels can be millions of times higher there than in the water. According to Dr. Thomas Murphy, a PCB expert of DePaul University, a person gets a greater dose by eating one meal of fish than by drinking 5,000 gallons of water. And the most popular game fish are the most contaminated. The EPA estimates that nearly all of the popular sport fish over seven pounds have PCB levels over the Food and Drug Administrtion's safety standard of 5 parts-per-million (ppm).

High PCB concentrations in the fish have caused problems for the commercial fisheries on Lake Michigan for most of the decade, completely wiping it out in some years. The Food and Drug Agency's possible plans to lower the acceptable levels of PCBs in fish sold commercially could further snag the nets of fishermen for some time to come.

"There's no question that there are effects on non-human primates even at low levels," said James Allen, whose work at the University of Wisconsin's Primate Center provided the impetus for PCB standards to be lowered. "We've found symptoms with feedings as low as 0.25 ppm over a two-year period."

Symptoms include changes in growth, learning behavior and some skin problems, while more severe effects linked to higher-level exposure include birth defects, liver problems and cancer.

Allen believes infants and women tended to be the most sensitive to the chemicals, and he believes that any level of PCBs in pregnant or lactating women is not safe.

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