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PCB: what fish is fit to eat?

By BARBARA COATS

Fish-eaters face a dilemma: —Deny themselves the sweet striped bass but sleep without worry over PCB?

—Or push the polychlorinated biphenyls and trust that their fish spent little time in the Hudson River?

State Conservation Commissioner Ogden L. Reid this week announced he will ban commercial fishing in the Hudson for most varieties of fish because high concentrations of PCBs in the river have contaminated them.

Commissioner Reid has advised that fish caught in the Hudson be avoided and considered unfit to eat. State Health Commissioner Robert Whalen agrees about Hudson caught striped bass but says other fish are not hazardous if they're only eaten once a week.

But what about Hudson born striped bass caught outside the Hudson River in the salty waters of Long Island Sound or even farther out to sea?

How does a fish fancier tell where his bass was born, or whether in its early days it consumed a dangerous amount of PCB?

Marine biologist William L. Dovel of Boyce Thompson Institute in Yonkers agrees that's a tough question. Just because a fish was born in the upper part of the Hudson, one cannot automatically assume that it is contaminated.

Striped bass, sturgeon and shad are anadromous fish, he explained. They spawn in fresh water but live in the sea.

Not until the bass, and shad and sturgeon return to the river this spring to spawn will the adult fish be able to be tested for PCB. Tests made in the open sea would be inconclusive because the tester would not know whether he had caught a Hudson-born fish or a fish from some other estuary. Tests made of striped bass caught in Long Island Sound last fall revealed less than dangerous levels of PCB.

Contamination from PCBs has been linked to cancer, liver disorders and lessened fertility. Persons who ate rice cooked in water highly contaminated with PCBs were known to have been fatally poisoned.

"It's a matter of individual judgement," a spokesman for Commissioner Reid said of the advisability of eating striped bass caught in waters outside the Hudson.

The extent of PCB contamination will not be able to be adequately judged until later this year, at the earliest.

Shad and sturgeon, other popular Hudson spawners will be tested in the spring before fishing for them is banned.

Sturgeon generally spend their first six, seven or eight years in the Hudson before they swim out to sea, Mr. Dovel said. They are caught eight or nine years later when they return to the river 75 to 150 pounds heavier than when they left. How much their early exposure to PCB would affect the adult fish is impossible to guess, Mr. Dovel says.

The Federal Drug Administration has said 5 parts PCB per million is the danger level for PCB. It is expected however that that level will be reduced to 2 parts per million.

Shad are expected to be less affected by PCBs than striped bass, mainly because all shad go out to sea after spawning. Some striped bass spend their whole lives in the Hudson.

Blue crabs that live in the brackish water of the lower Hudson have been tested and found to have 4 parts per million of PCB.

Eels are a special case because male eels live in the waters near the George Washington Bridge while the females spend most of their lives in the upper Hudson water and are thus much more

Hudson fish

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susceptible to contamination.

Small-mouthed and large-mouthed bass, catfish, brown bullhead, pickerel and yellow perch which spend their entire lives in the Hudson should definitely be avoided, biologists say.

Caviar and shad roe, eggs from the sturgeon and the shad have not been conclusively tested for PCB, but Mr. Dovel says he believes eggs are less likely to show signs of contamination than are fish. What is more likely to happen, he says is that the supply of eggs will diminish. PCB is said to reduce the reproductive potential in both man and animals.

The problem with PCB has only been seriously considered for the Hudson River since last August. PCBs were recognized in the mid-60s but were not noticed in the Hudson until the early '70s. The seriousness of the problem only "burst upon us recently," Mr. Dovel said.

PCBs, in the opinion of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, are originating mostly at two General Electric plants north of Albany. Commissioner Reid wants those plants to stop discharging all PCBs into the river by June.

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