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Urge effort to halt lakes contamination

By Harlan Draeger

U.S. and Canadian experts Wednesday recommended a crash program to control the use of organic chemicals contaminating fish in the Great Lakes.

The experts singled out potential health hazards from high levels of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) found in the flesh of Lake Michigan fish.

PCB is an industrial compound widely used as a fire retardant in closed electrical systems.

The PCB problem was spotlighted in the third annual report of the two-nation Great Lakes Water Quality Board.

Far-reaching new water quality goals were recommended in the board's report to the International Joint Commission, meeting in Windsor, Ontario.

ONE OBJECTIVE is a drastic cutback in levels of PCB in Great Lakes fish. The Food and Drug Administration has a limit of 5 parts per million on PCB in fish shipped interstate for human consumption. This is 50 times higher than the concentration limit recommended Wednesday by the U.S.-Canadian board.

The board urged "a co-ordinated program for use control of persistent organic contaminants, particularly PCB." It said the new program should begin "at the earliest possible date."

In the 165-page report, the board reported that DDT levels continue to decline in Lake Michigan fish. But it said PCB concentrations "show no evidence of a downward trend" and are well above the FDA tolerance level. The board said the figures "raise concern for human health implications" and fish reproduction.

LAST MONTH, the Michigan Natural Resources Commission proposed a state and national ban on the industrial chemical. A four-state Lake Michigan Toxic Substances Committee recently recommended a ban on PCB except for essential uses.

Donald Healton, regional FDA director in Chicago, said chubs being caught in Lake Michigan have a PCB level below the current 5-parts-per-million tolerance level. He added that commercial chub fishing is falling off rapidly.

"The real problem is in the sport fishery," said Healton. "Lake trout and coho salmon generally contain more than 5 ppm."

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