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Lake Survey Studies Chemical Pollution

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Intensified study of chemical pollution in Lake Pepin was undertaken last week by Wisconsin department of natural resources. Acquatic biologists spent four days gathering samples of fish at Alma and Nelson, which were sent to Madison for analysis.

Examinations will detect signs of polychlorinated biphenyls, industrial chemicals known to have caused cancer and deformed births among laboratory animals. A few weeks ago, the federal food and drug administration discovered illegally high concentrations of PCB in carp harvested for shipment to eastern markets. Pepin Fisheries had to bury some 30,000 lbs. of fish. Seining operations ceased.

State representatives will continue the survey into Lake Pepin and upper Mississippi river at Pepin and Prescott in July, according to Stan Kleinert, chief of a surveillance section. Experts say PCB levels generally are higher in game fish because of their feeding habits.

Such news was a disaster for sportsmen who achieved fine catches of walleye, northern pike, crappie and catfish along backwaters, sloughs, wing dams and sandy drop-offs. Adding to the dilemma were statements by Wisconsin and Minnesota agencies urging limited consumption of fish from the upper Mississippi.

Heading the survey team at Alma and Nelson was Rick Ranthum of LaCrosse. His group shocked and netted hundreds of fish to obtain enough samples for an adequate representation of the fishery. Specimens were scaled and filleted, except for catfish. Flesh was wrapped in aluminum foil and freezer paper, then refrigerated.

At state laboratories, the fish are ground and fat is extracted with a hexane solution. The extract is injected into a gas chromotograph, where various gaseous substances are emitted in different sequences. Peaks are recorded on graphs.

The peaks actually create a fingerprint for substances in the extract, which is compared with forms known to exist in PCB. Three common forms are Arocior 1242, 1248 and 1254.

Polychlorinated biphenyls have been detected in the river since 1970, but recent tests showed the chemical rising to higher levels. A report on 1973 sampling is expected to be released soon. The 1975 report should be ready in August.

Results will be shared by a task force of Wisconsin, Minnesota and federal agencies. In early stages of PCB analysis, chemists were not as sure of results as they are today, Kleinert asserts.

Meanwhile, resort operators on the Mississippi river and Lake Pepin have varying reports on effects of suspected contamination. There seems to be some slackening of patronage from Chicago and Milwaukee area fishermen, who once crowded the area around Wabasha during the peak of summer. Hesitancy also had been noted among those who came for such simple sports as swimming and water skiing. They apparently do not want to indulge in such activities in polluted water.

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