

The Salter Report

Environmental Authorities Continue to Study Lake Hartwell

BY CHARLES SALTER

The environmental nightmare that hit Lake Hartwell like a bolt out of the blue unfortunately won't go away with the dawn of a new day.

In this technological age, we have grown accustomed to seeing our problems and illnesses solved or cured by computers, brilliant minds of scientists and many wonder drugs.

Contaminated fish in the Twelve Mile Creek area of Lake Hartwell and the presence of a toxic chemical in the mud on the bottom of the 50,000-acre reservoir are likely to be around for a few years even if no more of the PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) is released into the water by an industry.

The Environmental Protection Agency, the Georgia Game and Fish Division, state Environmental Protection Division and South Carolina wildlife authorities are continuing to check samples of fish taken from a number of areas of Lake Hartwell.

Biologists warned fishermen not to eat fish caught in the Twelve Mile Creek arm of the reservoir. The Army Corps of Engineers said fish caught throughout the lake should not be eaten until further notice.

Jack Ravan, regional administrator of the EPA, said the PCBs are believed to have been used by an industry in that area of Lake Hartwell for three to five years, although the contamination of fish was not discovered until a little over a week ago.

The chemicals could possibly remain at dangerous levels in the mud on the bottom of the lake for three or more years, Ravan said.

Fish already contaminated can be expected to survive several more years in this environment, but it's a bit depressing to realize that fish healthy today are likely to consume smaller fish with toxic levels of the PCB in the weeks and months to come.

Ravan said he didn't see how he could assure people about the fish being safe for human consumption until checks of fish in the affected area show the PCB is no longer present. Five parts per million is the maximum health standard set by the U. S. Food and Drug Administration.

Tests on fish from Twelve Mile Creek revealed concen-



18-C ★★ ★ SUNDAY, AUGUST 22, 1975

trations of PCB ranging from three to 13 parts per million.

A South Carolina health department spokesman said this past week that the PCB compounds are suspected in cancer of the liver, cancer of the gall bladder and some related diseases, but conclusive evidence of such a link hasn't been determined.

Leon Kirkland, chief of fisheries of the Georgia Game and Fish Division, said fish checked below the I-85 bridge and below the S. C. 25 span did not approach the toxic levels, but further sampling will continue.

Kirkland suspects the PCB will cause stunting of fish and mortality of the little fry.

"Those contaminated fish would be alive in the lake two to ten years," Kirkland said. "The bigger the fish, the more the concentration of the PCB. It will settle out in the bottom of the lake and will be around for many years."

The biologist said he would hate to guess whether the PCB would remain at dangerous levels on the lake bottom, as long as mercury in other lakes and rivers. PCB is relatively insoluble, and that's the reason it would be around for a long time in the bottom mud," Kirkland said. "I would suspect nobody knows how much it moves in the food chain."

In the Twelve Mile Creek arm of the lake, toxic levels of the PCB were found in some largemouth bass and other sizeable predators, adult gizzard shad, channel catfish and a number of panfish.

Kirkland said in some samples of crappie, the PCB level was not as high.

"One walleye had a high concentration," he said. "We

would like to look at all species of fish and continue to take samples. This is a limited number of samples so far."

Kirkland said examples of PCB concentrations in fish taken below the I-85 bridge include a largemouth bass, 2.7 parts per million; a channel catfish, 1.1; a bream, 1.0 ppm; and a crappie, .3 ppm.

Leonard Ledbetter, chief of the Environmental Protection Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, pointed out that PCBs are widespread in the environment today, but for a number of years there was no knowledge or concern on the part of the FDA and other regulatory agencies that the PCBs would be a potential problem.

In many cases, the PCBs were identified in lab tests as DDT.

Six or seven years ago, a South Georgia farmer was told that DDT was found in his cows' milk, and he insisted he never had used DDT. Ledbetter said the substance later was found to be PCBs.

The PCBs have been used for a number of years in the manufacture of electrical transformers and capacitors, but in the case of the South Georgia farmer the PCBs were in polyethylene sheeting, Ledbetter said.

Within the past six to eight months, the FDA contacted suppliers of PCB and listed the users of the compounds in the various states. Ledbetter said he has conferred with two users of PCBs in Georgia to make sure that none was being released into the environment.

"The real key is to keep it out of the environment and out of the pathway to man," Ledbetter said, pointing out that when the source of contamination halts its release, the concentration begins decreasing.

Ledbetter said it has been established that fish accumulate the PCBs over a period of time.

Theoretically, families of some fishermen could have eaten many times over a period of months many fish with 1 concentration of PCBs just below the maximum of five ppm allowed by the FDA, with less potential harm to their health than persons who ate fish with 12-15 ppm or more of the chemical in only a few meals.

The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers office in Savannah said fishing activity on Lake Hartwell "has slowed down to practically a standstill" since the discovery of toxic levels of PCBs in fish in the Twelve Mile Creek arm in Pickens County, South Carolina.