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PCBs; Eight answers on Fort Gibson pollution

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FORT GIBSON LAKE—Last Sunday a group of about 200 Wagoner residents gathered at Western Hills State Lodge to hear a report from the governor's task force on the investigation of the pollution at Fort Gibson Lake.

At that meeting it was obvious that much confusion still remains in the minds of many area residents regarding the complex nature of the pollution, its effects, and what is being done to isolate and alleviate the problem.

This article is an attempt to answer the most essential questions which concern those who are victims of the contamination.

What are PCBs and where are they used?

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are an industrial chemical which have been manufactured in the United States since 1929. There are 200 different chemical species of PCBs; however only three or four are commonly used in industry. The structure of PCBs is similar in nature to DDT which has been banned from use in this country.

From 1959 to 1977 they were manufactured by the Monsanto Chemical Co.

PCBs have a number of industrial uses including lubricants, ink binders, and in the manufacture of carbonless paper.

In the past 60 years millions of tons of PCBs have been dumped into the environment and they have become a world-wide pollution problem.

What are the effects of PCBs on human health?
No comprehensive study exists on the long-term effects, but studies have documented the accidental exposure of people to high levels of PCBs.

In 1969 several hundred people suffered adverse health effects in Japan when a quantity of rice oil

was contaminated with PCBs.

The effects ranged from death, to skin discoloration, severe forms of acne, liver and kidney damage and an increased incidence of cancer.

According to the task force the consumption of a large number of contaminated Fort Gibson fish could produce similar effects.

Where in Fort Gibson lake are PCBs found?

Because PCBs do not dissolve well in water and tend to bind to soil particles the PCBs are found in the sediment at the bottom of the lake and in the tissues of animals which inhabit the lake.

Although exhaustive tests have been performed no PCBs have been found in the waters of the lake. That means the lake is safe for swimming, boating, camping and even as a water supply for area towns.

Are Fort Gibson fish safe to eat?

PCB levels exceeding the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's guidelines of 5 parts per million for human consumption have been verified in three bottom-dwelling species of lake fish: flat-head catfish, channel catfish, and buffalo.

Levels as high as 16 ppm have been detected in fish in the Pryor creek area.

All species of lake fish have been tested and all other species have been found to be below the FDA guidelines for human consumption.

State health department official Dwayne Farley has calculated that a person would have to consume 300 eight-ounce fillets from contaminated fish to reach the PCB levels which caused health damage in the Japanese study.

All of the fillets would not have to be eaten at the same sitting, and since the human body has no known mechanism for ridding itself of the chem-

icals they tend to build up in the body's fatty tissues.

What is the source of the PCB contamination of Fort Gibson?

So far more than \$60,000 has been spent in an intensive three-month investigation with no conclusive results on the source of the influx.

Four firms in the Mid-America Industrial complex at Pryor have been cited for allowing PCBs in excess of allowed levels into the lake.

Hearings on the citations have been set this month and next for Georgia Pacific, N-Bon Corp., Gulf Bond Building Products, and the Pryor Industrial Conservation Co.

The task force investigation continues, but each sample requires a week and a half of lab work to analyze and only one laboratory in the state has the sophisticated equipment to check for PCBs. The process to isolate the source is a time-consuming and tedious process, and the task force promised a further report in December.

Another possibility is the World War II munitions plant which occupied the site of the industrial park in the 1940's. A separate investigation is being launched of two disposal sites at the munitions plant which were located on old maps.

What actions are being taken to deal with the economic impact of the pollution on the tourism business?

Lake area businesses have been devastated by a reported 50 per cent drop off in tourist trade since the PCB problem began being publicized in July.

It was learned Friday that low-income loans through the Small Business Administration will be made available to area businesses. A meeting has been tentatively set for Thursday evening

for area businessmen to meet with SBA officials to try to find ways to deal with the hard-hit tourism industry.

Is there any way to rid the lake of PCBs?

The only known method for disposing of PCBs is to incinerate them at a temperature above 2,700 degrees. Currently only two places in the U.S. perform such a process.

Collecting the PCBs from the lake would be an prohibitively expensive job.

"The prognosis is that PCBs are going to be around for a very long time. They're a very persistent chemical," according to task force member Ron Jarman of the Oklahoma Water Resources Board.

Is any legal action currently underway in connection with the pollution of the lake?

Such action appears imminent. Muskogee attorney Don Pearson announced last week that a substantial civil suit will be filed in the next few days.

Pearson represents about 15 lake area businesses. A meeting between the businessmen and Pearson has been set for Monday evening to discuss particulars of the lawsuit.

In addition Assistant Wagoner County District Attorney Keith Whitely had promised criminal prosecution of any entity found to be polluting Fort Gibson.

Contacted last week Whitely said department was busy taking statements from persons who had been employed at industries in the Pryor industrial park and who had knowledge about the pollution.

Whitely said that approach was not being used by the state task force in their investigation.