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PCB turnaround

Fishing in Lake Michigan may be freed from warnings that the fish are not fit to eat, if a trend noted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in September continues.

For the first time since monitoring began five years ago, the levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) in Lake Michigan coho salmon decreased.

The levels in adult salmon taken last fall from the eastern portion of the lake were 9.21 parts per million compared to 10.77 measured in a similar catch from the same area in 1975.

No more than 5 ppm is allowed by the Food and Drug Administration in food for human consumption. The same report listed PCB level declines in Lake Michigan chubs and lake trout.

Restrictions on chemicals of the PCB group were started in 1971. Before that, the chemicals were commonly used to absorb heat in electrical capacitors and transformers and in hydraulic fluids. Officials determined that it posed a health hazards to both humans and animals after many birds died from eating PCB-contaminated fish.

PCB is a long-lasting contaminant that builds up in the fatty tissues of animals.

Monsanto, Inc., the sole U.S. manufacturer of PCB, has restricted sales of the chemical and has announced it will halt all PCB sales in October.

"Perhaps the days when we can stop advising people to limit consumption of Great Lakes fish will come sooner than we've imagined," said William Turney, protection bureau chief of Michigan's Natural Resources Commission.

If so, all friends of the lake can rejoice.