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Chemical levels in fish may result in new pollution laws

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — The state Department of Natural Resources may seek a legislative ban on a chemical contaminant officials say is turning up at "alarming levels" in Lake Michigan fish.

The chemical is polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), used in household products from hand soap to paper.

"If the Environmental Protection Agency is not in a position to act nationally, we may have to go to the legislature and effect a ban on PCBs in any product," said William Turney, chief of the bureau of water management at the DNR.

Turney said the EPA may not be able to act because of statutory limitations on its authority.

Turney did not rule out the possibility products containing PCB could be allowed while meeting federal regulations.

PCBs appeared at such high levels in Lake Michigan fish earlier this year the U.S. Food and Drug Administration seized some shipments of chubs. The agency said PCB levels were "dangerously high."

FDA limits are five parts per million, but some of the chubs had as much as 20 parts per million.

Potentially harmful to humans are levels of 500 parts per million.

Turney told the Natural Resources Commission in a report Thursday the situation is "alarming" because PCB levels have remained the same or increased since 1970, rather than decreasing as predicted.

The level of most other contaminants has decreased, Turney said.

"In 1970, we felt we had things under control," he said. "We buttoned up all the major discharges of PCBs."

At that time, PCB was used mainly by industry. The sole U.S. manufacturer of the product, Monsanto Chemical Co. of St. Louis, agreed to stop producing the chemical for certain industrial uses which led to contamination.

"There were 30 industries reporting use of PCBs (in Michigan) last year," said Turney, "a whole lot more than previously. When we followed it up we found PCBs showing up in all kinds of things."

PCBs are chemically associated with DDT. When PCB was first unmasked as a contaminant in 1969 it was found in concentrations of up to 300 parts per million in catfish in the Saginaw Bay area.

In the past few years DDT and mercury in Michigan fish have declined, making the PCB problem more significant, said Turney. Recent data shows PCB is "very toxic," he noted.

Tests on Rhesus monkeys at the University of Wisconsin showed the animals were "sensitive" to PCBs at levels below the FDA limits.

But Turney emphasized, "That data is not validated and it doesn't mean that humans are sensitive at that level or anything like that."

The Lake Michigan Toxic Material Committee found herring gulls which ate fish from Lake Michigan with high PCB levels died in "significant numbers because of PCBs. We feel there is a definite correlation."

A year ago, the DNR's planting of young pike in various streams resulted in "almost 100 per cent mortality," said Turney, who linked the problem to PCB. He said certain selection sites, most in Western Michigan, were abandoned.

In 1970, some mink ranchers fed their animals salmon contaminated with PCB and had trouble keeping young animals alive, said Turney.