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Sportman's Notebook

'PCBs' Change Lake Michigan

ALGOMA, Wis. — Fall is painting the leaves around here a tinge of yellow, a blush of red, a hint of orange.

That means that Winter will soon put the Lake Michigan trout and salmon charter fishermen in this northern Lake Michigan town out of business again.

It isn't going to be an ordinary winter for these fishermen.

Normally, they lay back during the snows to the "boat barns" and fish-spotting houses to sip brandy, judge the past season or complain about poachers.

Not this year.

This winter these fishermen will ponder, as best they can, the effect of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) and how they will effect their $2.6 million fishing industry.

The PCBs, first discovered in 1881, belong to a class of chemicals known as chlorinated hydrocarbons, which include most common pesticides and solvents.

In 1929, Monsanto Chemical Co. of St. Louis, Mo. began making PCBs for use as insulating material in electrical transformers, capacitors and other electrical equipment.

Their use became worldwide for many goods, including caulking compound for windows, in refrigerators, air conditioners and in other appliances.

Everything was going along just fine for the PCB producers, until a Swedish chemist found PCBs in fish, bird feathers and human hair.

Since that discovery, PCBs have been linked to cancer in animals, discovered in various concentrations in striped bass in the Atlantic Ocean, in the snows of the Antarctic, in the milk of nursing mothers and in Lake Michigan fish.

The federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has set a 5 parts per million (PPM) acceptable level of PCBs in Lake Michigan's fish.

And the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the agency which regulates hunting and fishing, regularly issues warnings to anglers not to eat more than one meal per week of Lake Michigan caught fish because of the PCB levels in the fish skin. They advise pregnant women not to eat any such fish.

All this was fine with the fishermen, because it permitted them to fish under the warning.

However some time this Fall, the FDA, calling PCBs the "chemical of the 1970s, as bad as DDT ever was," will drop the acceptable level from 5 to 2 PPM.

Test show that Lake Michigan's stocked coho and chinook salmon, brown, rainbow and brook trout all exceed the new proposed limit.

"Christ," said one charter boat owner over whiskey and water one evening, "I've been eating these fish for years and nothing's happened to me."

"Now someone in Washington (D.C.) is going to put me out of business," he added.

That's not quite what the Wisconsin DNR officials have in mind, but changes being considered to comply with the new FDA rule border on the radical.

Here are some of the plans:

— Banning taking fish from Lake Michigan. The present fish and take-home programs would be replaced with a catch-and-release plan.

Boats would be checked on entering ports to make sure fishermen have no fish onboard.

— Planting other freshwater fish — such as the walleye and muskie — in parts of Lake Michigan less susceptable to PCBs is being considered, in effect readjusting completely the entire fish population.

— BEginning a massive public education program saying, in effect, according to one game manager, that people shouldn't be eating the fish.

The fishermen are shaking their heads at the future. The DNR officials are scratching theirs trying to find a solution to the PCB problem.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), meanwhile, is trying to assess the spread of the PCB worldwide.

Only one major instance of human sickness from PCBs occured nine years ago, when a rice crop was accidentally contaminated in Japan. That dosage of PCBs, up to 1,000 times higher than found in fish, caused 1,300 people to become ill and, some believe, resulted in deaths.

More than 90 per cent of Americans have PCBs in their skin tissue, according to an EPA study, and 1 per cent have a level that exceeds the proposed guideline for contaminated fish.

Considering all this, the EPA banned the PCB production for 1979.

As that date approaches, the Lake Michigan fishermen are caught in the middle.

One wonders what Californians would do if given the choice of fishing and eating the fish with an invisible poison? Suppose, for instance, you bought a new kind of beer, tried some on your dog first, and old Rover keeled over.

You'd probably lose your thirst pretty quickly. Anglers here must decide their hunger for fish tainted with PCBs. And on that decision hangs the future of Lake Michigan's fishery.