Fish Kills Continue

This has been the year of the long-standing problem in Missouri pollution-caused fish kills.

It also has been one of the worst tolls in modern times.

Through August, Missouri had experienced 29 fish kills, almost all caused by situations that have occurred before - - sewage flushes, chemicals and mining muck - - several from the same old source. In 24 incidents where a count of dead fish was possible, the estimates totalled 206,000.

A two-inch rain in Springfield in late August was closely followed by a fish kill in the James River for 10 miles below Wilson Creek. In recent years huge amounts of organic material build in the creek during dry periods and then flush into James River after a cloudburst.

Springfield currently is constructing the state's most modern sewage plant.

In another incident, a pump failed in the Excelsior Springs sewage system and raw sewage poured into Fishing River over the Labor Day weekend, killing fish. On the next weekend sewage below California killed fish in the Moreau River.

In several of the incidents, an accurate count of fish killed was impossible because of circumstances. Fisheries biologists take sample stretches of a stream in which a fish kill occurs, count all visible fish (recording size and species) and make an estimate of the total fish kill from that.

The estimates, aside from giving an idea of the magnitude of the kill, are used by the Attorney General's office to collect damage from offenders. The American Fisheries Society has devised a scale of fish value by species that law agencies use widely in setting damage amounts.

One major fish kill where a count was impossible was when a barite mine dam burst, letting tons of fine silt and water pour over the countryside into Mill Creek and Big River near Potosi. Because the mud obscured visibility, there was no way to count the fish, numbering in the theusands, that were smothered by the thick mixture.

Major fish kills came on an average of one a week through August. In the first big one, an estimated 106,000 fish died when a Tarkio fertilizer firm flushed an ammonia tank and the flushing got into Tarkio River.

But of all the fish incidents, the one with the worst potential was averted only by quick and herculean effort from Department of Conservation employees.

A load of carp bought in Wisconsin and stocked in seven St. Louis city park lakes on July 31 as part of the Urban Fishing Program was found to contain heavy accumulations of PCBs, a family of chemicals in the chlorinated hydrocarbon family to which belong DDT and some of the most long-lasting and toxic pesticides.

The Department removed the fish from the lakes and buried them.

A recent article in Sports Illustrated magazine by Robert Boyle talks about PCB-contaminated fish which have showed up in various parts of the country (aside from the Wisconsin fish, Missouri has not had the PCB problem).

Recently a Upper Mississippi River Task Force, composed of representatives of environmental agencies in Wisconsin and Minnesota and federal agencies released a report showing more than 20 per cent of carp tested had PCB residues exceeding the Food and Drug Administration's maximum allowable 5 parts per million.

Carp, white bass and catfish were the highest in fat where PCBs concentrate and therefore most likely to contain high levels of the contaminant. Sport fish, such as walleye, sauger, smallmouth bass and crappie averaged less then two parts per million.

Missouri has tested fish for PCBs and has found only two, several years ago, which showed levels above five parts per million.

Boyle's article has some terrifying statistics--according to the Evironmental Protection Agency, all Lake, Michigan trout and salmon longer than 12 inches exceed the allowable 5 ppm in their flesh; large lake trout from Lake Superior, generally considered the cleanest of the Great Lakes, are contaminated; research monkeys almost invariably showed great reaction to PCBs, including skin lesions, loss of hair, birth defects and aborted pregnancies, that, again according to the EPA, 90 per cent of Americans have 1-3 parts per million PCBs in fatty tissue.

Thus far, Missouri has been spared the major concentration of PCBs, but they are worldwide. They have been manufactured in the United States since 1930 by only one firm, Monsanto of St. Louis.

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