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Area EPA official unsure of authority on chemical curbs

DULUTH (AP) — The regional director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says he is not sure the agency has the authority to limit a toxic industrial chemical to "essential uses."

Francis Mayo was asked verbally in late May to institute such a ban on the use of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), which recently have been found in fish taken from Lake Superior and Lake Pepin, a widening of the Mississippi River between Red Wing and Wabasha.

Dr. Donald Mount, chairman of the Lake Michigan Toxic Substances Committee, said he made the recommendation that the use of PCBs be almost totally banned in the country.

Mayo said Monday he had not received a written report from the committee, which has representatives from Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and the federal government, calling for the ban.

The Michigan Natural Resources Department has said the PCB levels in Lake Michigan are "alarming" and spokesmen said the department also would push for a ban.

PCBs are chemical compounds used in many industrial processes, such as hydraulic fluid, heat transfer fluid and electrical insulators. They also are found in hand soaps. Monsanto Chemical Co. is the only U.S. producer.

Dr. James Allen, a University of Wisconsin pathologist, has conducted research which he says established that the chemical can cause birth defects or prevent reproduction in fish, birds and mammals.

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