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Threat to Great Lakes fish

First it was the lamprey eel that threatened to ruin fishing for salmon, lake trout and other food fish in the Great Lakes. This aroused federal and local government action to curb the eel population and restock the lakes with fish. It is an ambitious program which has cost more than 175 million dollars over the past 17 years.

Now the restocking program is threatened, not by a resurgence of the eels but by a man-made danger — a hydrocarbon called polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB). This chemical not only makes the fish unsafe for human consumption, but renders them sterile. Unless the fish can reproduce, the restocking program becomes a costly wasted effort.

This was put in stark terms by Nathaniel P. Reed, assistant secretary of the interior, at a government-sponsored conference on the subject in Chicago. "With the present preponderance of PCBs," he told the delegates, "the lifespan of the Great Lakes fishery will be limited to a single generation."

This would be a tragic outcome, for at least two reasons. It would deprive Great Lakes fishermen of a cherished way of life — and of their means of livelihood. It also would eliminate a source of food which adds substantially to the nation's supplies.

Reed said something else that gets to the heart of the matter: "Nothing short of immediate drastic action will enable us to raise anything better than lakes full of somnolized fish." A plan for such action should be formulated and put into effect without delay.

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