Cancer Agent Level High in State Birds

By DAVID MORRISON

Dangerous levels of a suspected cancer agent have been found for the first time in some game birds around the Coosa River near Rome, the state Board of Human Resources said Thursday.

The board did not close the area to hunting, as it did to commercial fishing two months ago, but cautioned hunters that mallards, wood ducks and woodcocks sampled in the area had registered "some pretty high counts" of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and should not be eaten.

"This only applies to birds taken in the Rome area," said David Cranshaw, public information director of the Department of Natural Resources. "We will sample some other birds around the state immediately and will issue some advisories if they are necessary."

But, he added, there was no reason to suspect that birds from other areas of the state would be contaminated. Similar studies done on fish from other areas found "some trace amounts" of PCBs, but not enough to cause alarm, he said.

Officials would be "very surprised" if any new traces are found elsewhere in the state, he said.

He said departmental scientists in-

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PCB

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sist that there is no need for concern that PCBs might have contaminated other animals along the Coosa, such as domestic poultry, swine and cattle.

"It really only affects the animals that actually live and feed on the river and along the banks," he said.

"I want to stress the animals which contained large amounts of PCB live in the area year-round and are not migratory," Cranshaw said. "We will survey the migratory birds very quickly and issue a report."

PCBs collect in sediment and are absorbed by insects and worms which may then be eaten by fish, Cranshaw said.

The Food and Drug Administration considers any PCB count higher than five parts per million (ppm) dangerous for humans. Of four woodcocks tested in the Coosa area, one had a count of 28 ppm, another had 26 ppm and the others tested at 11 and 7.8 ppm. Two mallard ducks tested showed counts of 11.5 ppm.



Staff Map-Jere Warren

PROBLEM SPOT

Suspected of causing liver and gallbladder cancer in humans, PCB is an organic substance used in the manufacture of electrical capacitors and transformers.

Cranshaw described the Rome-Coosa River area as the state's "PCB problem area."

The agent is used at a General Electric plant in Rome and, "because of some sloppy housekeeping" for a number of years, according to DNR, some of it was released into the river and contaminated the fish.

"They (the plant) have corrected the problem," Cranshaw said, "but this stuff (PCBs) stays in the food chain for a long time. What we are seeing now are the remains of what was put there over the years."

The federal Environmental Protection Agency found a similar problem on the South Carolina side of Lake Hartwell and temporarily banned fishing on the lake. However, that ban has been lifted.

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