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State Says Some Striped Bass And Salmon Pose a Toxic Peril

By RICHARD SEVERO

State officials warned consumers yesterday not to eat striped bass from the Hudson River or salmon from Lake Ontario because Federal and state researchers have found that the fish contain dangerously high amounts of PCB, a toxic chemical used in a wide range of manufacturing processes.

The warning was issued by Ogden R. Reid, the State Environmental Conservation Commissioner, and Dr. Robert P. Whelan, the State Health Commissioner.

"I don't want to be an alarmist," Mr. Reid said, "but this is a question of public health."

The warning is essentially a regional one. Striped bass from the Hudson River can be bought many miles away. It is not possible to tell just by looking at the fish if it contains PCB.

Mr. Reid said his advisory would remain in effect at least until the was able to determine the full scope of the problem, which he is "fearful" may involve more than just striped

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bass or salmon.

Mr. Reid's restraint was endorsed by Dr. Michael M. Baden, deputy chief medical examiner of New York City. "I think it is important," he said, "that the preliminary findings not frighten anyone, because they must be more fully evaluated to determine what risks there are to humans in the concentrations found."

The chemical in question is polychlorinated biphenyl, more commonly known as PCB. It has been in use since 1930 in the manufacture of plastics, paints, electrical transformers, printing ink, caulking compounds and hydraulic fluids.

It is similar in molecular structure to DDT and is not readily soluble in water but highly soluble in fats. Like DDT, it is a chlorinated hydrocarbon, the dangers of which were voiced by the late Rachel Carson in the early nineteen sixties. But not until the last five years has a broad spectrum within the scientific community begun to warn of PCB's perils. It has already been banned in Canada and Britain.

In the United States, where it is manufactured only by the Monsanto Chemical Company, Federal standards say that any food containing more than 5 parts per million of PCBs is unsafe to eat.

In recent weeks, Federal researchers tested 131 shiner minnows and three rock bass from the Hudson River at Fort Edward and Hudson Falls, about 50 miles north of Albany, and near two General Electric plants that have dumped PCBs into the water.

The rock bass contained 350 parts per million of PCB and the minnows 78 parts per million.

The Federal researchers reported their findings to Mr. Reid, who ordered his staff last Monday to continue and amplify the testing. Six striped bass caught near the Tappan Zee Bridge, less than 20 miles from New York City, had an average of 5.7 parts per million of PCB in their flesh. One had 37 parts per million.

The Department of Environmental Conservation now has 48 more striped bass, six of them caught between Poughkeepsie and Peekskill, and hopes to have laboratory work completed on them by next Monday.

The salmon taken out of Lake Ontario had levels of between 15 and 20 parts per million of PCB.

Mr. Reid says he sure that General Electric's discharges into the river have contibuted to the PCB problem and that other companies are involved. Some fish caught north of Hudson Falls also contained PCB.

"I have asked our counsel to contact Monsanto and get from them as quickly as possible a list of their customers in New York State," Mr. Reid said.

G. E., which has a permit to dump some toxic wastes into the river, has closed the two plants in question for summer vacation and will reopen them Aug. 18. Robert Paul, of G. E.'s community-relations department at the Fort Edward plant, said, "We don't put PCBs into the river intentionally. But we live in a real world, and it is going to take time to solve the problem."

Mr. Reid has also ordered his staff to start checking quality of drinking water at various points in the state.

There are no data to suggest that eating fish from New York waters has caused either illness or death. A spokesman for the Federal Environmental Protection Agency said yesterday that physicians did not normally check for PCB. This was confirmed by Dr. Baden.

"Checking for this kind of compound in body tissues at present is a research project and is not done in routine post-mortem studies here or anyplace else in the country that I'm aware of," Dr. Baden said.

It is difficult to assess how many people have eaten the various fish that thrive in the Hudson, Lake Ontario and other waterways in the state. Commissioner Reid has been advised by his staff that 1.3 million pounds of striped bass were taken from the Hudson last year by sport and commercial fishermen.

Mr. Reid said he feared that northern pike, large-mouth and small-mouth bass, yellow perch, white perch and white catfish might have unhealthy concentrations of PCB in their flesh. He is more hopeful that in shad and sturgeon, which spawn in the river in the spring, may be less affected.

"I understand that despite all the warnings we've had, General Electric was putting 48 pounds of PCB into the Hudson at Hudson Falls and Fort Edward each day," Mr. Reid said. "This year, they apparently reduced the amount to less than two pounds a day. I don't see why they should be putting any of this stuff into any river."

Mr. Paul of G.E. noted that PCB was used in making capacitors, devices that hold electrical charges, and that if for some reason the capacitors had to be disposed of, they were buried in landfill sites away from water.

"That is absurd," said David Seymour, president of the Hudson River Fishermen's Association. "Has anybody at G.E. asked what happens when it rains at a garbage dump? If any of the containers holding PCB are broken, the stuff will leach into the ground and may contaminate water for miles around."

One of the earlier incidents involving PCB occurred in 1968 in Japan when approximately 1,000 people developed a skin disease after using rice oil that had been contaminated by PCB. According to research done by Dr. Robert Riseborough, an authority on PCB from the University of California at Berkeley, there were nine pregnant women out of 300 studied. He said that two of their babies were stillborn and "all showed symptoms of chlorobiphenyl poisoning." The Japanese attributed 16 deaths to PCB poisoning.

In 1971, the presence of PCB in Lake Michigan ended its role as a commercial fishery. In Washington, Gus Speth, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said last night that the Federal Government could emulate Canada and halt the use of PCB in this country.

However, Glenn Schweitzer, director of the office of toxic substances for the Environmental Protection Administration, said that the Federal Government lacked the power to do this because the Toxic Substances Control Act has not been acted on by Congress, although it had been pending for four and a half years.

Mr. Schweitzer added that the Federal Government was trying to reduce the amount of PCB that industry could put into the water through the Government's water-permit program. This program permits some dumping of toxic materials, but limits the materials depending on their toxicity and where they are being dumped.

Jerry Hansler, regional director of E.P.A. in New York, said his agency was actively working with General Electric in an effort to reduce the amount of PCB discharged from the two upstate plants.

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