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Fish Industry On Hudson Hurting; Lawsuit Planned

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Commercial and sport fishing on the Hudson River has been brought to a virtual halt because of the state's warning that long-lived fish may contain PCB's, a toxic organic chemical, according to interviews with fishermen up and down the river.

But the fishermen, a hardy breed with a love for the river, don't plan to idly sit by and watch their burgeoning industry die. Dave Seymour, the president of the Hudson River Fishermen's Association, says his organization plans to launch a "classic environmental lawsuit" against the industries and the bureaucracies which created the problem. And he is calling for Congressional hearings to see how the problem was allowed to occur.

"It's a real disaster," Seymour said today. "What can you say about a federal government which has spent billions to clean up the Hudson and at the same time gave General Electric the right to dump this toxic pollutant in the upper Hudson?

"All the while we have been bailing out the alleviate to clean up the Hudson, General Electric has been sitting in the back of the boat drilling holes in the stern."

According to Seymour, there are still 70 active commercial fishermen who make their living by taking striped bass, shad, blue crabs, eels and other fish from the Hudson River. Overall the Atomic Energy Commission (now the Nuclear Regulatory Commission) has estimated that 80 per cent of the Northeast's striped bass—a $100 million industry—are hatched in the Hudson River.

The Fulton Fish Market in New York City has already experienced a severe decline in the sale of salmon and striped bass. On Aug. 7 when Ogden Reid, the state commissioner of environmental conservation, made his announcement that Hudson River fish could contain high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCB's, he also warned against eating salmon taken from Lake Ontario. Most of the salmon at the Fulton Fish Market are shipped in from the western United States, but the publicity about the state's warning has had an impact on salmon sales regardless of where they are from.

Nat Gadeloto, the proprietor of Gadeloto's fish market, said he has stopped handling all striped bass. "I have a license to sell the stuff, but I am staying far away from these fish even though most of my striped bass came from the southern Jersey shore and Florida."

He said he wouldn't go back to selling striped bass "until there is firm evidence that the river is really getting cleaned up."

Ace Lent, a lifelong Hudson River fisherman who runs the Ace and Chas. Lent Tackle Shop in Verplanck, said he has already felt a sharp decline in his tackle business. "The summer months is the off season for the sale of striped bass and most other Hudson River fish," he said. "But there is definitely a decline in all parts of my business. People are wondering if it is safe to eat blue crabs, eels and almost any other fish which is taken from the river."

Charlie White, a long-time fisherman who works on the river in the West Point-Garrison area, said it is too early to tell what the overall impact on fishermen will be. "But I'm sure the Hudson is not the only river with this problem," he said. "Before long the federal government may find that the problem is everywhere."

Seymour said his organization, which has an impressive record in battling against industrial polluters and utilities along the river, is meeting with lawyers to discuss a major lawsuit against Monsanto, the only manufacturer of PCB's in this country; General Electric Corp., the only known discharger of these chemicals into the upper Hudson River; the Environmental Protection Agency; the state Department of Environmental Conservation and possibly other organizations.

"We have here an environmental Watergate on our hands," he said. "We have evidence that General Electric has discharged up to 100 pounds a day of this chemical into the Hudson. For three years the state and federal government hasn't even monitored the discharges of these chemicals into the river."

Seymour said he has contacted Rep. Hamilton Fish, Jr., Rep. Richard Ottinger, 24th District, N.Y.), and Senator Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., asking for a Congressional inquiry into how PCB contamination was allowed to happen. "We want to get the bastards before a Congressional committee where they can no longer do the double shuffle in avoiding answers to our questions," he said, referring to officials at Monsanto, General Electric and the state and federal environmental agencies.

Seymour said his organization also supports the stand taken by the Hudson River Sloop Restoration Inc. which called for EPA administrator Russell Train to invoke his emergency powers to immediately halt the discharges of PCB's into the Hudson.

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