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PCB File

State Says Some Striped Bass
And Salmon Pose a Toxic Peril

by Richard Severo 556-1234

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 they were able to determine the full scope of the problem, which he is "fearful" may involve more than just striped bass or salmon.

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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 concentration found."

In Use Since 1930

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.

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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.

Testing Is Continued

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.

Mr. Reid says he's sure that General Electric's discharges into the river have contributed 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. Poughkeepsie, for example, takes its drinking water directly out of the Hudson River, and no water purification process known can remove PCBs.

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

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"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.

Featured At Restaurants

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.

No fishing license is required of sportsmen who fish the Hudson, and thus there is really no sure way to say how many fish they accounted for, how many they threw back and how many they ate.

There are between 10 and 15 commercial fishermen active in the river south of Albany, and striped bass is featured in restaurants in the Hudson Valley.

Mr. Reid said he feared that northern pike, large-mouth and small-mouth bass, yellow perch, white perch and white catfish would have unhealthy concentrations of PCBs in their flesh. He is more hopeful that shad and sturgeon, which spawn in the river in the spring, may be less affected. Not all of the many varieties of fish have been tested, and it is thought that shad and sturgeon would not be in the river at this time.

The PCB problem is not a new one, but the emergence of it at such levels in New York waters has surprised state officials.

A Problem Stated

"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.

Stanley Kleinert of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources said yesterday that "we had hoped the PCB would biodegrade but it has not yet happened." Mr. Reid said his research suggested that PCB in water could remain toxic for decades.

Ubiquitous Substance

The substance is ubiquitous and persists once it gets into the food chain. A federal environmental protection administration spokesman said yesterday that PCB had been found in turtle eggs in Europe, and in the milk of pregnant women in Newfoundland. It has also been detected in chickens that have eaten feed made from fish meal.

The "new Columbia Encyclopedia" notes that PCB "is extremely stable withstanding temperatures of up to 600° F. The Encyclopedia notes that in the past the contaminant has been found in cardboard containers which was ultimately traced to printers ink.

The effect of PCB on minks living near Lake Michigan has been documented. Gilman D. Veith, head of the Federal EPA National

Water Quality Laboratory in Duluth said that minks eating fish with 0.6 parts per million of PCB failed to reproduce and suffered a mortality rate of 71%. Adverse effects, including pigmentation changes and liver enlargement have been noted in tests with rats, guinea pigs and chimpanzees.