Contaminated fish likely; eat less, says scientist

By THOMAS C. JACKSON

NEW MILFORD — Connecticut residents should "eat less fish" contaminated by the powerful industrial pollutant polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), a leading environmental scientist warned Saturday.

Cutting back on PCB laden fish is especially important for women who are or plan to become pregnant, National Resources Defense Council staff scientist Dr. A. Karim Ahmed said during a conference on the long lasting chemical here.

Measurable levels of PCBs have been found in striped bass taken from Long Island Sound and the Connecticut River but State Health Commissioner Dr. Douglas Lloyd has said the contamination is too low to endanger human health.

"The so-called 'no effect level' has not been established for PCBs," Ahmed told the Housatonic Valley Association gathering. Federal research linking PCBs to liver cancer in laboratory tests suggests a "safe intake level" for the toxic substance may not exist, he said.

Despite strong opposition from commercial fishermen, the federal standard for PCBs in food will be cut by more than 50 per cent, Ahmed predicted. The National Resources Defense Council has called for a gradual program to completely eliminate the chemical from human foods, he said.

"It's really becoming a nightmare," Ahmed said. "PCBs have been found in just about every part of the world." From fish in Antarctica to tuna caught off the Atlantic coast and recycled paper used to package food, the toxic substance exists, he said.

Human health effects of PCB poisoning include nervous disorders, miscarriage, birth defects, still birth and painful skin disease, he said. Current U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) limits for PCBs in food are based on a 1972 Japanese incident affecting more than 1,000 persons, he said.

New research shows low levels of PCBs may also have significant effects on reproduction and could possibly spark liver cancer, Ahmed said. Dropping the federal PCB tolerance to zero would protect human health but also wipe out some of America's greatest fisheries in the northeast, he said.

Working under the existing standard, FDA inspectors have impounded several loads of fish from Michigan for PCB contamination. Connecticut levels were generally above the FDA limit now in effect.

But PCB readings in striped bass taken from the Connecticut River and all but one of the Sound collection sites surpassed the current Canadian standard which Ahmed predicted the FDA will adopt later this year.

PCBs are an extremely stable chemical now widely used as an insulating fluid in electrical components. Companies like General Electric have persisted in using PCBs in transformers and capacitors due to the chemical's resistance to flame, spokesmen say.

This same stability makes PCBs almost indestructible once they enter the environment. Although chemically similar to DDT, PCBs last for decades in nature, slowly poisoning predatory animals.

Essentially insoluble in water, PCBs slowly settle into the fine sediment which fills channels of rivers and streams, Ahmed said. Suspected sources of environmental pollution range from industries to dumps where PCB laden products are slowly decomposing, he said.

Dredging urban harbors or navigable rivers can stir up years of accumulated PCB deposits resting in bottom muck, Ahmed said. If handled through standard dredging procedures, the pollutant would be quickly returned to the water to slowly settle out down river.

Balancing the economic necessity to continue dredging programs and the environmental damage threatened from riled up pollutants may lead to a method of cleaning up the bottom while clearing a channel, Ahmed said.

Sponsored by the Housatonic Valley Association, Saturday's session included representatives of the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and New England region of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

EPA Surveilance Director Edward Fitzpatrick said the toxicity of PCBs has been well established. The agency's monitoring efforts to date have centered on a GE plant in Pittsfield, Mass. which dumps up to a quarter pound of PCBs a day into the Housatonic River.

Ahmed said Massachusettes residents should be cautious of eating fish taken from the Housatonic River below the GE facility. But a "data gap" exists about conditions along the stream in Connecticut, he said.

"One of the great ironies of the present situation is that more than three years ago the Federal Water Pollution Control Act directed the federal government — specifically EPA — to take swift action to reduce the discharge of PCBs and other toxic water pollutants to safe levels," Ahmed wrote in a recent article for "Environment" magazine.

"The fact that today there is no meaningful national program to regulate PCB discharges is a result of the federal government's failure to carry out the act as written," he wrote.

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