2/8/79 FYI: E. T. Mollica
R. A. Stohr
D. Wood
G. Young

FROM: R. Isham

A Ortiz

FMS

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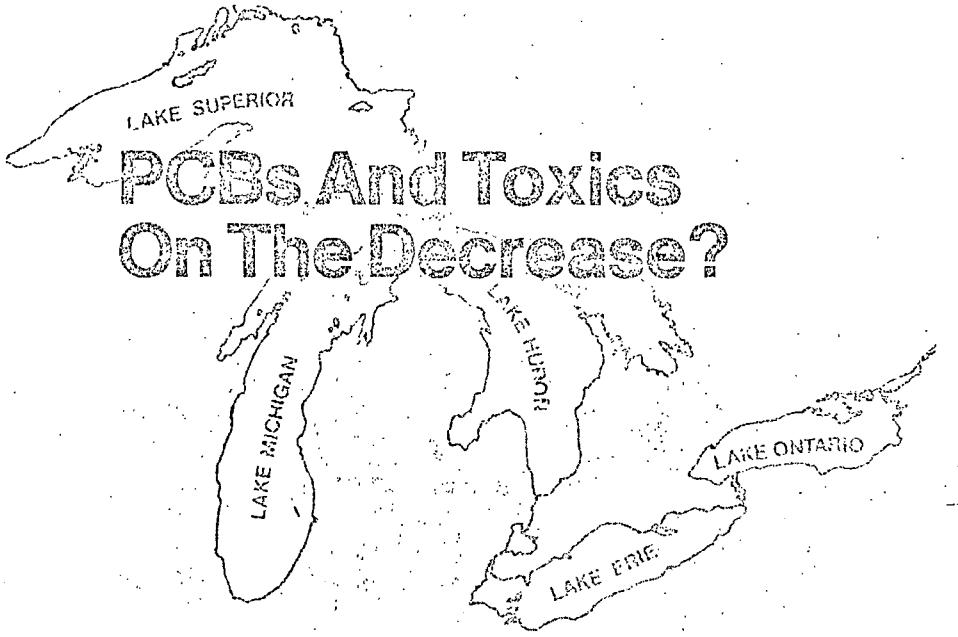

PCBs And Toxics On The Decrease?

By William Sonzogni, Ph.D.
Water Resources Scientist
Great Lakes Basin Commission staff

Several years ago, I wrote a paper for the *Communicator* which presented a rather optimistic outlook for a rapid response of the Great Lakes to pollution control efforts. At that time, most people believed that the lakes, due to their large volumes and low inflows, would respond only very slowly to pollution control efforts. Recovery times on the order of hundreds to thousands of years were frequently cited.

Today, however, more and more scientists are hopeful about a relatively rapid response by the lakes to pollution control efforts. Point source phosphorus control programs, although by no means fully implemented, are starting to show signs of paying off in Lakes Erie and Ontario. Perhaps most importantly, certain toxic substances which most had gravely predicted would continue to cause problems in the lakes for centuries, show evidence of responding reasonably quickly to control strategies.

The response time of the Great Lakes system to decreased total phosphorus loads was recently reviewed by an international task group of U.S. and Canadian experts. Using the latest information and assessment techniques, this group agreed that the lake systems should respond to phosphorus control measures much faster than previously thought.

For example, the response time for Saginaw Bay and Lake Erie were estimated to be on the order of one to two years or less. The response time for Lake Ontario was estimated to be about six to seven years. Lakes Michigan and Huron were estimated to have response times of about five years. Lake Superior, the largest of the lakes, was predicted to have the slowest response time, perhaps 15 to 20 years.

These estimates were based on total system responses; recovery of nearshore or harbor areas could conceivably be even faster.

Despite the rapid response times, noticeable improvements should not be expected in all the lakes as a result of current point source control programs (limiting phosphorus effluent concentrations to one milligram per liter). The upper lakes (Superior and Huron) and Lake Michigan should not experience major changes, since present point source control will not result in a major decrease in the total loading and average lake phosphorus concentrations are already low.

The phosphorus control effort will prevent future degradation in these basins, however. Further, the point source control effort should result in measurable improvement in the lower lakes.

Of the toxic substances which have found their way into the Great Lakes, the insecticide DDT, and the fire retardant [illegible] known and most studied. Both chemicals have seriously contaminated organisms in the Great Lakes system. Great Lakes fish have been particularly affected and, in some cases, accumulation of the substances in the fishes has led to their being unfit for regular human consumption.

Although firm actions have been taken to reduce or prevent further inputs of DDT and PCBs into the Great Lakes, a major question facing planners and managers is how long dangerously high contamination levels will persist. Many have thought that recovery would be extremely slow due to the stability of these contaminants. However, recent evidence points to the possibility of a more rapid recovery.

Much of this expectation is based on the considerable decrease in the levels of DDT found in Great Lakes fish. This new data, based on a monitoring program that has been carried out since a ban was placed on the use of the pesticide in the basin, indicates DDT should disappear completely from fish in the lakes in 25 years or less. Previous scientific estimates ranged up to 100 years. Permanent trapping of DDT in the bottom sediments appears to be the mechanism which accounts for the loss from fish.

The rapid disappearance of DDT has also sparked some optimism for rapid removal of at least some of the PCBs in Great Lakes fishes. Based on research conducted at the University of Wisconsin, it is estimated that about 80 percent of the PCBs in fish could be permanently lost to bottom sediments in a matter of years. The other 20 percent will probably remain in the system for a long time due to constant recycling from sediments.

The PCB problem is complicated by the fact that, although major controls have been placed on PCB use, considerable quantities are still finding their way into the lakes. Nevertheless, the fact that a good portion of the PCBs in the system may disappear rather quickly once sources are eliminated or reduced provides a good deal of hope for the future.

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The current thinking of experts on the rate of recovery from pollution is of considerable consequence for planners and managers. Rather than waiting several generations for recovery from certain pollution problems, results can be expected in a relatively short period.

At the same time, our understanding of the Great Lakes system is incomplete, so our optimism must be tempered with some caution. Nonetheless, the potential for the Great Lakes to respond to pollution control efforts appears much brighter than once thought.

Janesville Gazette, Wisc.

Jan. 8, 1979

Rewards of Independence

The upbeat tone that accompanied the election of Lee Sherman Dreyfus as the first Republican governor in the state of Wisconsin in eight years was quashed last week by leaders of the GOP's Assembly Caucus.

Milt Lorman, a Republican state representative from Fort Atkinson, had served with distinction during his first term. He functioned well in the statehouse and earned respect of legislators on both sides of the aisle. His Democratic counterparts, while acknowledging basic philosophical differences, have praised the businessman-attorney for his knowledge and expertise and his constructive attitude toward legislation.

He sought re-election this past fall, and one of the proudest moments of his political career was when he received the endorsement of organized labor. Another highlight was a testimonial dinner sponsored jointly by the chairmen of both political parties in Jefferson County.

But his work on two of the Assembly's committees, Revenue and Environmental Protection (the name now changed to Environmental Resources), apparently didn't meet with the approval of his party's leaders. Last week, Assembly Minority Leader John Shabaz of New Berlin announced his committee appointments for the 1979-80 term. Lorman's name was conspicuous by its absence from the committees he had served on last term.

Shabaz said the assignments were changed to provide freshman Republicans with positions on key committees. But Lorman and observers of the Capitol scene see the manuever by GOP leadership as punishment for Lorman's independence on several issues.

Lorman, president of a scrap metal recycling business which has branches in Fort Atkinson and Janesville, strongly supported bills bills limiting phosphates in detergents, requiring natural gas conservation and regulating hazardous and toxic waste disposal. These would seem to be positions that mean the most good for the people of the state. Unfortunately, they appear to be contrary to the reactions of conservative Republican Assemblymen.

The minority leadership appears to have missed something in the November elections. Dreyfus won the governorship by appealing to the people of this state. Shabaz and his cohorts in the Capitol have denied there is a place for open-minded consideration of legislation, choosing instead that petty politics should reign supreme. So much for the "back to the people" movement of the Republican Party.

There may be a remedy to the situation, however. If public opinion is turned against the move by Shabaz, the GOP leadership may be forced to reinstate Lorman on the committees where he can do the most good, for both his party and the people of the state.

The people to contact are Shabaz, Assistant Minority Leaders Tommy Thompson, Elroy, and Caucus Chairman Delmar DeLong, Clinton. They should want to know your opinions.

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PCB, DDT levels drop in Great Lakes fish

While Michigan officials have found dramatic drops in the levels of DDT and PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in fish from the Great Lakes, there will be no immediate change in the state's health warnings against consumption of certain fish species from state waters. That's the upshot of last week's meeting of the state Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR), Public Health Dept. and Agriculture Dept.

The state is reluctant to ease the consumption warnings until more fish have been tested.

According to John Hesse, chief of DNR's office of toxic materials, PCB and DDT levels were "down so far that we could hardly believe our eyes." In 39 fish samples, all but one had PCBs below the federal 5 part-per-million level. Mercury and dieldrin levels remained steady.

Stiffer laws, new-water-treatment processes, and bans on some compounds presumably contributed to the improved levels. □

Feb. 21 '79 Chemical Week

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