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Legislator would ban PCB

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INDIANAPOLIS — A relatively unknown chemical compound in existence for 46 years is threatening the million-dollar fishing industry in the Great Lakes, and an Indiana legislator is trying to minimize the damage.

"We might be too late already," said B. Patrick Bauer, D-South Bend, author of a new bill, House Bill (HB) 1363, to prohibit manufacture, sale and use of Polychlorinated Biphenyl (PCB), better known by its initials, PCB.

Bauer, chairman of the Public Health and Environment Committee of the Indiana House, has called a public hearing on his bill. It will be in the Statehouse at 7:30 a.m. (Northwest Indiana time) next Thursday.

Meanwhile, the sponsor, a teacher in South Bend, said he is rounding up experts who can testify about the dangers of PCB.

"Not enough is known about it, or how much damage it has caused," said Bauer. "For years, ill effects of PCB were blamed on DDT."

Generally, DDT has been banned. It is a powerful insecticide that was used in agriculture until the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) prohibited its use.

Bauer said PCB might be deadlier than DDT. He noted Chicago area publications warning that Lake Michigan fish not be eaten because of excessive amounts of PCB found in them.

A month ago, EPA administrator Russell Train conducted a hearing in Chicago and alerted the nation about recent discoveries showing PCB as extremely dangerous.

Bauer said the Great Lakes and the Bloomington, Ind., area were identified by EPA as potential danger spots for PCB contamination.

PCB — a syrupy clear liquid resembling mineral oil — is known to be fire resistant, inert and resistant to chemical decomposition.

It has been used mainly in the production of electric transformers and capacitors. It also is used in making paint, printing ink, sealant, some adhesives and heating and cooling fluids.

Bauer said it has been estimated that 700 million pounds of PCB has been produced in the last 46 years, and that production today is at the rate of 40 million pounds per year.

Since the material doesn't decompose, it could accumulate and cause untold catastrophe, said Bauer, who noted he hopes experts who will testify Thursday can talk of some remedies.

As far as Bauer has researched, Indiana is the first state to start legislative action toward banning PCB. The EPA also has issued directives about the material.

HB 1363 would prohibit PCB or any materials containing it, but the ban isn't total and immediate.

Bauer proposed that no more than 250,000 ppm be allowed on July 1, 1977. The amount will be limited to 1,000 ppm on July 1, 1978, and to 100 ppm on Jan. 1, 1979.