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Curb on PCB Is Stiffened For Interstate Fish Sales

By RICHARD SEVERO

In a move that could have a significant impact on the American fishery and on the eating habits of many Americans, the Food and Drug Administration yesterday ordered a reduction in the levels of cancer-causing PCB's that will be permitted in fish and other foods shipped in interstate commerce.

Among the fish with the highest levels of contamination are yellow and white perch, catfish, whitefish, chubs, striped bass, eels, carp, trout, salmon, sturgeon and shellfish.

The order will take effect on Aug. 28 unless it is delayed by legal action by those who stand to suffer direct economic hardships, such as commercial fishing interests.

A spokesman for one industry group, the National Fisheries Institute in Washington, D.C., said last night that no decision had yet been made in this regard. The Institute has already informed the Government that it does not think the more stringent standards are necessary.

Impact of the Order

Covered by the order are poultry and dairy products as well as fish. But it is in fish where the problem has been seen at its worst, and thus the fishing industry stands to suffer the worst economic consequences from the order.

PCB's, or polychlorinated biphenyls, have been used in transformers and capacitors. They have also been used as adhesives in the manufacture of brake linings, in waterproofing canvas, as hydraulic fluids, as a flameproofer for synthetic yarns, in the making of plastic bottles and in carbonless carbon paper. In addition to cancer, PCB's cause stillbirths, deformation of bones and joints and skin rashes.

The F.D.A. estimates that the new rule will mean that approximately 35 million worth of fish a year, fish now routinely consumed by Americans, will be regarded as tainted and will not be permitted in interstate commerce. The order does not technically cover fish sold in the same state where they are caught, but health standards in states are generally brought into conformance with Federal standards.

The $8 million estimate contrasts sharply with the assessment of the economic impact made by the drug agency in 1977.

Earlier Estimate of Losses

At that time, the agency estimated that the standards announced yesterday would cause a $7 million loss of salt-water fish and a $40 million loss of fresh-water fish.

Moreover, commercial fishing interests and some state departments of environmental protection complained that direct and indirect losses would be even greater.

In Wisconsin, for example, there was an estimate that 75 percent of the state's fishery would be of questionable value if the Federal Government lowered the allowable level of PCB's from 5 parts per million to 2 parts per million. This is precisely what the new order calls for. The commercial and sports fishery in Wisconsin alone is valued at more than $230 million a year to that state's economy.

An F.D.A. spokesman said that recent tests on fish suggested that PCB's levels were now not so high as they were two or three years ago, perhaps a result of recently enacted restrictions on the disposal of PCB's.

The F.D.A. order comes four years after extremely heavy concentrations of PCB's were found in Hudson River fish, causing a ban on most types of commercial fishing there. The circumstances surrounding the contamination of the Hudson, the Great Lakes and other major waterways became the cause of national concern.

Period of Inaction

Two years passed before the agency announced its intention to mandate lower allowable levels, in 1977. Then nearly two more years passed with no action. Environmentalists and public health advocates began to suspect that the agency had succumbed to pressure from commercial and sports fishing interests.

Last January, the Environmental Defense Fund in Washington began a lawsuit to force the drug agency to promulgate the lower levels it had promised, levels that would bring the American fishery into conformity with North American standards that had already been established by Canada.

In March, Dr. Donald Kennedy, the Commissioner of Food and Drugs, gave the promulgation of the new order a high priority.

Dr. Kennedy has sent letters to the Governors of Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, the states with the most serious PCB contamination problems, explaining the Federal action and why it was taken and urging them to take further action, if necessary, to protect consumers in these jurisdictions.

Basically, fresh-water fish have been most seriously affected, along with salt-water fish that spawn in fresh water. However, the contamination is everywhere; PCB's have been found in animals 11,000 feet down in the North Atlantic and in virgin snow in Wisconsin.

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