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New England water: Better, and worse

BOSTON (AP) — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said today the quality of New England's water was improving but new problems were cropping up.

The second annual report of the agency's regional office said 51 per cent of the region's miles of rivers were suitable for fishing and swimming in 1975, up from 45 per cent the previous year.

The state-by-state breakdown of river miles suitable for fishing and swimming: Connecticut, 42 per cent; Massachusetts, 26 per cent; Maine, 62 per cent; New Hampshire, 54 per cent; Rhode Island, 64 per cent; and Vermont, 62 per cent.

The report said the amounts of lead was dropping in the drinking water supplies of Boston-area communities because of new treatment programs. Bacteria levels were dropping and, because of more judicious salting of winter highways, chloride levels were also on the decline.

But the EPA said organic compounds in water supplies, particularly chloroform and carbon tetrachloride, posed a problem of uncertain dimensions. The compounds are believed to form through the action of chlorine used for disinfectant on other substances present in the water from municipal or industrial discharges, or even naturally present.

Chloroform is known to cause cancer in mice and rats.

A nationwide study found chloroform in the water supplies of Lawrence, Mass.; Newport, R.I.; Waterbury, Conn.; and the Metropolitan District Commission in greater Boston.

One Newport sample showed chloroform at 103 parts per billion, and EPA said it was working with city officials on ways to reduce it.

A followup study will include 10 New England cities — New Haven, Waterbury and Hartford, Conn.; Providence and Newport, R.I.; Springfield and Boston; Manchester, N.H.; Burlington, Vt., and Portland, Maine.

For solid wastes, EPA said it had identified 15 industrial users of polychlorinated biphenyls, a substance more longlasting than DDT and causing serious illness if absorbed in high concentrations.

River sediment showed PCB present in concentrations of up to 139,000 parts per billion. Sludge from the New Bedford sewage treatment plant contained PCB at a concentration of 84,000 parts per billion, and EPA said it would study emissions from New Bedford's sludge incinerator.

Monsanto Co., the only manufacturer of PCB, has announced plans to stop making it.

In air quality, EPA said all New England monitoring sites found no violations in 1975 of the standard for sulfur oxides.

New violations of the 24-hour standard for particulate matter were found at Bangor, Maine, and Worcester, Mass., along with a repetition of 1974 violations at another Worcester location and at Springfield, Mass. Each state showed some violations of the one-hour standard, EPA said.

All test sites showing violations of the eight-hour standard for carbon monoxide in 1974 also showed violations in 1975.

However, maximum levels of the pollutant were down significantly in some places, particularly New Britain, Conn., and Burlington, Vt.

All test sites in 1974 showed violations of the standard for photochemical oxidants, a principal component of smog. In 1975 stations at Burlin, N.H., and Portland, Maine, reported no violations, but the monitoring stations were not working in the summer months when violations would be expected.

The number of violations dropped in New Hampshire and significantly in Connecticut and Massachusetts, but rose in Rhode Island, probably because a number of Rhode Island test sites were not in operation in 1974.