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State Health Agency, Citing PCB's Urges Ban on Eating Fish From Hudson

By RICHARD BEVERO

Governor Carey's Health Planning Commission has recommended either a ban or sharp restrictions on the consumption of most species of fish from the Hudson River and salmon from Lake Ontario because of their contamination by dangerous levels of PCB's — polychlorinated biphenyls.

The commission, in a report to the Governor, says that infants, young children and pregnant women should refrain from eating "any fish from the Hudson River or salmon from Lake Ontario" and that adult sports fishermen should limit intake to no more than one meal a week of such fish.

Hudson River eels, which have high PCB levels because of their feeding habits, should be avoided by all persons at all times, the report said.

The commission also backed the decision by Ogden R. Reid, commissioner of Environmental Conservation, to ban commercial fishing in the Hudson for the first time in its history. Mr. Reid who will issue specific orders this week, plan to exempt shad and possibly sturgeon from the ban for a while, at least until he has had time to study levels of the toxic chemicals in the spring runs.

Dr. Kevin Cahill, special adviser to Governor Carey on health affairs, asked the commission to study PCB contamination last year, after the state learned that there were very high levels of it in fish in the Hudson and Lake Ontario—levels that on occasion were far higher than the safety guidlines established by the United States Food and Drug Administration.

Confined to Electrical Gear

PCB's, a group of chlorine-laden compounds, have been in widespread industrial use for 45 years but because of their suspected links to cancer and other diseases, have been largely confined in the United States in recent years to the manufacture of electrical equipment. The fire-resistent PCB's are noted for their ability to hold a charge in capacitators.

An administrative hearing called by the Department of Environmental Conservation and conducted by Prof. Abraham Sofaer of the Columbia Law School recently found that two General Electric capacitor plants north of Albany were the major sources of PCB's in the Hudson.

It remains unclear how PCB's have gotten into fish in Lake Ontario, Lake George and various lakes that provide New York City's water supply, but the scientific literature written in the past six years suggests that PCB's may be airborne. The chemicals have been found in virgin snow in Wisconsin and in other areas far removed from apparent industrial sources.

Dr. Cahill said he was proud that "New York has taken national leadership in attempting to define the scope of the problem and doing it in a sound, scientific way, without jumping to unwarranted conclusions."

No Threat to Water

Dr. Cahill noted, for example, that although the dispersion of the chemical was widespread, there was no evidence at present that it posed a peril to drinking-water anywhere in New York State, including those supplies that come directly from the Hudson River, such as Poughkeepsie.

Both Commissioner Reid and Russell E. Train, the head of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, want General Electric to agree to "zero discharge" of PCB's into the environment. The only difference in their proposals is a matter of 10 months — Mr. Reid's coming earlier, next Sept. 30.

General Electric was discharging more than 30 pounds of PCB's a day into the river from the two plants at Fort Edward and Hudson Falls, and in 1976 brought the amount down to two to three pounds a day. The company has indicated it can bring levels down to 3.8 ounces a day but says it would be technically impossible to agree to "zero discharge" because it feels traces of PCB's would always manage to get into the environment, even in the most thoughtfully designed closed system.

Originally, the company indicated that if it could not operate within the guidelines proposed by Mr. Reid, it might have to close its capacitor plants in New York and move them elsewhere.

Departure Less Likely

However, several recent developments would appear to make a move less likely. Mr. Train has emphasized that he plans to eliminate PCB's from the environment everywhere in the nation and the Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Company, the sole maker of PCB's in the United States, reports plans to phase out the manufacture of PCB's and develop substitutes.

The Dow Chemical Company also says it has developed an environmentally and economically sound substitute. Japan, which had had bad experiences with PCB's, has banned its use, and other nations are considering either bans or severe restrictions.

General Electric has not commented officially on these developments but sources in the company now say that substitutes for PCB's appear inevitable.

The Health Planning Commission told the Governor more research was needed to determine the health effects of PCB's, but added: "It is imperative that this issue be raised on the national level. We believe the course of action we are recommending is a prudent one."

The commission ask force on PCB's was headed by Dr. Merele Eisenbud of the Institute of Environmental Medicine at New York University Medical Center.

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