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PCB fish warning came as no surprise

The warning issued last week by the state department of health was not unexpected. People have been told to limit the amount of lake trout and coho salmon on a menu to one average size serving per week.

The reason for the warning is the presence of large amounts of PCBs (polycholinated biphenyls) in the fatty tissues of the larger fish.

The presence of the PCBs in the fish has been known since 1971. However, no official warning and no seizure of fish caught by commercial fishermen could be made until a court case was settled earlier this year. At that time it was determined that PCBs were an additive, even though they were not deliberately put into the food and products by men, but instead were added through the environment.

Fish ingest the PCBs and the inert chemical settles in the fat. As the fish grows, the amount of PCB increases until the amount is beyond the levels considered safe by the federal food and drug administration.

PCBs are manufactured in the United States under the tradename Arocior by the Monsanto Chemical Company. The industrial compounds were introduced commercially in 1929. They were used for a variety of purposes including insulating fluids in electrical transformers, and capacitors, heat exchange fluids, hydraulic fluids, paints, plasticizers, printing inks, fire retardants, carbonless copy paper and other uses where electrical conductive, non flammable and heat resistance properties were useful.

PCBs, which have a possible 210 compounds, were not discovered in the environment until 1966. In 1971, Monsanto stopped selling PCBs for everything except sealed electrical equipment. A total ban of PCBs has been rejected by federal agencies because the use of the compound is considered essential in transformers and capacitors. Banning PCBs for the electrical equipment would increase the risk of fire and explosion.

There is evidance that PCB residues may be diminishing in the environment, according to department of natural resources studies.

But that has not prevented Michigan from leading the fight to have all PCB use banned.

The Lake Michigan toxic substance committee has recommended that PCBs be limited to essential uses.

In the meantime, the Wisconsin department of natural resources is conducting fish sampling programs on Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River to see if PCB levels in fish are any lower now than they were in previous years.

In 1974, the department sampled outfalls of major dischargers into the Lake Michigan drainage area. Where significant amounts of PCBs were located, the department is conducting plant surveys of industries in the area to track down sources of PCB discharge.

Fish are not the only products in which PCBs have been found.

Recycled paper often contains PCBs and when packaging materials are made from PCBs the compound is passed on to the food. As a result, regulations have been imposed on food packaging materials in regard to PCBs.

No one is sure if a permanent ban will have to be made. But just as DDT was once prominent in Lake Michigan, the PCBs are still found. Only when they are eliminated from both the water and the air will the large lakers and coho that are the pride of the sports fishermen be safe to eat more than once a week.

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