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Clean-up of Great Lakes may take up to 15 years

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Cleanup of polluted Great Lakes waters may take 10 to 15 more years and constant surveillance will be needed thereafter, according to a report by a joint Canadian-American board supervising the effort.

In its annual report, the International Joint Commission said progress in cleaning up the lakes has been made since 1972 when the United States and Canada agreed to work together on pollution problems. But the commission cautioned it could take 15 years for the efforts of some pollutants to disappear after discharge into the lakes has stopped.

Lake Erie continues to have the most serious problems, the commission reported, with high levels of industrial chemicals, heavy metals and phosphorus causing contamination of the water and depletion of the oxygen supply needed by marine life.

Lake Michigan water quality is generally good, the commission said except for a serious problem with PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), a widely used industrial chemical known to cause cancer in laboratory animals. The commission report state that levels of PCBs in Lake Michigan fish show no sign of decline and remain "well in excess" of federal standards. "Early and continuing discussions on a binational level are needed to consider the consequences of strict controls on the important sales, use and disposal of PCBs," the commission said.

Monsanto Chemical Co., manufacturer of PCBs, has announced a voluntary program to limit sales to essential uses, but the action has been termed inadequate by the Lake Michigan Federation, a pollution watchdog group. The federation is co-ordinating an effort to have manufacturere and use of PCBs banned.

The joint commission report said local pollution problems in Lake Michigan have been found at Green Bay, Milwaukee Harbor and the Indiana Harbor Slip Canal.

Lake Superior and Lake Huron were reported to be in compliance with water quality standards, but concern was expressed over the future of Lake Ontario, which is showing signs of decreased oxygen supply in deep waters.

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