GEORGIA'S WATERS ARE RUNNING SCARED

PCB Blues—'You Never Get Rid of 'Em'

By ROBERT LAMB

The first signs that went up along the Coosa River in Rome were merely advisory. They "recommended" that people not eat fish taken from the stream.

That was on Sept. 2, following a finding by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) that samples of fish from the Coosa contained very high counts of polychlorinated biphenyls, either known as PCBs.

Six days later, Bob Gaw, the Floyd County conservation ranger who had ordered the first signs, was putting up new ones in big letters, the new signs said, "THIS RIVER IS CLOSED."

Smaller letters clarified that the closing applied to commercial fishing, but the message was loud and clear to aficionados of all kinds.

"Usually, there are about 10 fishermen at the dock and dam at any time of day," Gaw said. "Today there were one."

There were other signs that the situation had grown more serious. A DNR news release on Sept. 3 said fish in other bodies of water in this part of the state and elsewhere" were being sampled to determine whether and to what extent PCBs might be found.

Five days later, another DNR news release said that "every major stream and impoundment in Georgia" was being monitored for PCBs.

And at its session closing the Coosa, the Board of Natural Resources, in a special meeting on Sept. 7, said the high level of PCBs in fish taken from the Coosa and the possibility of high levels in fish from other waters in the same system "constitute an emergency and an imminent peril to the public health, safety and welfare."

What is there about PCBs that merits such concern and precipitated such drastic action?

"Well, we're not experts in PCBs," J. Leonard Ledbetter said Friday, "but PCBs are toxic and cumulative."

Ledbetter, who is director of DNR's Environmental Protection Division, explained that the very qualities—stability, heat resistance and nonflammability—that make PCBs a useful industrial chemical make them highly persistent in the environment.

They are easily absorbed into animal tissue and are not excreted, he added, and they find their way into man primarily through the food chain.

"They are not indestructible, but they are nondegradable," he said. "They accumulate in your system. You never get rid of them."

The known source of PCB pollution of the Coosa, Ledbetter said, is a General Electric plant that uses PCBs in making power transformers.

The PCBs got from the plant into the river "through poor housekeeping practices and carelessness" at the plant, Ledbetter said.

Through such practices and carelessness "over a 10-year period, they saturated their property," Ledbetter said, adding that GE is making efforts to curb the pollution. They have paved some saturated areas and built a shed over another area to stop rain from leaching PCBs into the river.

"We expect them to eliminate it entirely," he said.

Asked who the plant had been allowed to leak PCBs into the river for 20 years, Ledbetter said that for many years PCBs were not considered a problem.

"We didn't even know it was going into the environment," he said. "And we didn't know how to measure it."

A spokesman for General Electric in Rome disputed portions of Ledbetter's assessment and echoed others.

"One cannot deny that over the years, from 1954 to 1969, when nobody knew there was anything allegedly bad about PCBs, that we were perhaps not taking as much precaution as we are today," said W. R. "Bill" Buchanan, a manager for the GE transformer department in Rome.

Buchanan said the use of PCBs had been confined in previous years to earthen dikes subject to leakage because his company was not aware of the dangers. Concrete dikes are used now, he said.

He added, however, that he was "a little concerned" that Ledbetter had tagged GE with "poor housekeeping and carelessness."

"Any PCBs that our company here has been responsible for have been through the leaching process," Buchanan said. "But the way they put it, it sounds as though we'd been running a pipeline with PCBs directly to the river, which simply isn't so."

Buchanan said GE has spent $1.25 million in the past two years to clear up the pollution problem.

Ledbetter said that 30 years ago, PCBs, which are chlorinated aromatic organic compounds made from a petroleum base, were used much more widely in industry.

Today, PCBs are supplied only to "closed" applications in the electrical power industry, such as transformers and capacitors.

"Because of contamination of the environment, the Monsanto Corp., which is the sole U.S. manufacturer of PCBs, voluntarily restricted the sale of PCBs," Ledbetter said.

He produced a report by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, however, that said domestic production of PCBs still amounted to about 40 million pounds per year as of 1974.

As recently as 1972, the report added, only limited information on the toxicity of PCBs was available. And it was not until July 1973 that the Federal Food and Drug Administration established limits on the amounts of PCBs that may be lawfully present in food.

The danger level for PCBs in fish was set at five parts per million.

"We found 127 parts per million in fish taken at Mayo's Bar, downstream of Rome," said J.G. Johnston, chief of DNR's Information Section.

"We got these test results last Wednesday (Sept. 1)," said Ledbetter. "We notified Alabama about Lake Weiss the next day."

What about laboratory results on fish from other Georgia waters?

"We don't think there are PCBs at the danger level in any other water system in the state," Ledbetter said. "But we're just getting under way with our statewide survey."

The survey began last week, Ledbetter said Friday, and so far only the test results from Clark Hill (near Augusta) had come in. They showed less than one-half part of PCBs per million.

The tests, being conducted at the Atlanta DNR lab and at the University of Georgia, are "very time-consuming," Ledbetter said. "We're trying to expedite the tests, because we know that the people want to know the results," he said.

Earlier tests of Lake Hartwell fish, prompted by a finding of PCB contamination in a South Carolina section of the lake, found that fish in the Georgia waters were safe to eat.

"We have taken samples from the Tugaloo River and the Georgia section of the lake and have found no fish with a level of PCBs higher than that recommended as safe by federal guidelines," Johnston said.

Fishing at the Coosa, on the other hand, was down only in certain areas Friday, perhaps because the ban had not been in effect long enough to gain wide circulation.



At the Bait Shop, owned by Waymon Storey, a saleswoman reported no ill effect on the store's business. "We're still selling 'em," she said.

And at the Toggle Bait Farm, Lee Tuggle said, "You can't tell until the weekend. If (the ban) has had some effect, I suppose, but we had fair business last weekend. It's about normal, I'd say."

But at Eubanks' Country Store, a seller of fishermen's supplies, Mrs. Frances Eubanks said, "Fish were dying in Armuchee Creek, below the old bridge, week before last from a chemical pollution—not PCBs—from another plant. Both (pollution incidents) together are really hurting business."

Apparently the effect on the fishing supply business depends upon what part of the river the business primarily serves.

Gaw reported that one supplier at the lock and dam said his business had "dropped down to nothing."

"Sport fishing had dropped a good bit," Gaw said. "Some are still fishing, but they say it's for meeting, not eating."

Gaw said the ban's hardest blow was dealt to the five or 10 commercial fishermen who depend on the fish for their sole source of income.

"Then there are about 30 to 50 who fish commercially to supplement their incomes," Gaw said.

Lawrence E. McSwain, DNR's assistant chief of fisheries, said, "Basically, Georgia has a very minor amount of commercial fishing inland, and that's mostly catfish. Very few people in Georgia earn their living from commercial fishing, particularly inland."

Asked if there were other ramifications of poisoned waters in Georgia, Ledbetter said, "We're not aware of other ramifications. Our main concern is the pathway to man—the air he breathes, the water he drinks, the food he eats. If there are PCBs in any of our water systems, we simply want to find it, or any other such substance, and get them out."

He said that the danger level for PCBs in drinking water is much lower than in fish—"only one part per billion."

"We had a similar problem with mercury poisoning in 1968-70 at the Olin plant in Augusta and at Allied Chemical in Brunswick," he said. "They said we couldn't eliminate that, but we did."

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