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Reports of Chemical in Fish Initially Withheld

By Richard Severo

Staff members of the State Department of Environmental Conservation were informed of unhealthy quantities of PCB in fish at least five years ago, but did not report their findings to the Commissioner's office, according to department officials.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Ogden R. Reid reported that unhealthy levels of the toxic chemical had been detected in perch, a pickerel and a small-mouth bass caught in the Hudson River 20 miles south of Albany. Previous PCB warnings had mentioned only salmon taken from Lake Ontario and striped bass from the Hudson.

"I think there has been a failure here," said Mr. Reid, who assumed his post last January and who learned of the PCB levels only through Federal sources. "It is clear that different divisions did not always talk to each other and it would seem that we need a major administrative overhaul."

As a result of the PCB warnings, salmon sales have dropped sharply at the Fulton Fish Market, even though all the salmon there comes from the West Coast. In recent years, the PCB problem has been detected on the West Coast, but there is no data to suggest that salmon sold at the Fulton Fish Market contains PCB.

Bass Still Selling

Ed Monani, who runs the Joe Monani Fish Company, said that "if the Government ever reported all the strange things that are in beef and pork and chicken and everything else, we'd be so frightened that we'd probably starve to death." He said the market for striped bass had weakened but not as much as that for salmon.

Ed Dewey, owner of Gage & Tollner's Restaurant in Brooklyn, said he had taken striped bass off the menu and would leave it off until he got a clearer idea of whether the bass from New England waters, many of which come from the Hudson, are contaminated with levels of PCB higher than five parts per million.

The Federal Government says that fish containing more than five parts per million of PCB are unfit to eat and should not be shipped in interstate commerce.

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The furor started last Aug. 8, when Mr. Reid, joined by Dr. Robert Whelan, the State Health Commissioner, warned consumers not to eat striped bass from the Hudson or salmon from Lake Ontario after levels of PCB, polychlorinated biphenyl, were found to exceed Federal standards.

Used In Manufacturing

PCB is used by five companies in the state to make capacitors and transformers and other electrical equipment.

Federal researchers found rock bass with as much as 350 parts per million near two General Electric Company plants at Fort Edward and Hudson Falls, on the river 50 miles north of Albany. State Scientists also found high levels in striped bass near the Tappan Zee Bridge, less than 20 miles north of New York City.

Mr. Reid was even more upset when he found data indicating high PCB readings in Ontario salmon in 1970 and 1972. The levels in some of the fish were several times higher than Federal standards recommend for human consumption.

The state environmental department's files also contain 1972 reports indicating high PCB readings in large-mouth and small-mouth bass, pike and sturgeon taken in the mid-Hudson area. Taking the results of all tests, more than half the fish tested contained PCB in excess of Federal health standards.

There were warnings from private citizens as well. On Feb. 17, 1971, Robert H. Boyle, a senior writer for Sports Illustrated and an avid fisherman, wrote to Carl Parker, chief of the department's Bureau of Fisheries, informing him that he had sent six Hudson River striped bass to the Warf Institute in Madison, Wis., for laboratory analysis.

Mr. Boyle said the tests showed 11.4 parts per million of PCB in the eggs and 4.04 parts per million in the flesh.

"These are grim figures and I certainly think the state should warn fishermen not to eat striped bass eggs," Mr. Boyle wrote.

Mr. Parker has not been available for comment but his office has recently requested another copy of the letter from Mr. Boyle, who has acknowledgement of receipt of his original. However, it cannot be found in the state files.

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In the last few days, state and Federal officials have received lists of companies that use PCB. The lists were provided by the only PCB manufacturer in the United States, the Monsanto Chemical Company.

In 1974, the two General Electric plants in question purchased 5.7 million pounds of PCB. State officials believe the company dumped an average of 30 pounds a day into the river during the year. The amount has reportedly been reduced this year.

The company has the right to dump PCB into the river by virtue of a permit granted it by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency. One environmental group, the Hudson River Sloop Restoration, Inc., says its research shows that the permit virtually gives the company the right to dump as much PCB as it wants into the river.

Thus far, only General Electric has been documented as putting PCB into the Hudson. However, other companies are buying large amounts. The companies and their 1974 purchase figures are as follows: Niagara Transformer Corporation, Buffalo, 440,000 pounds; York Capacitor of Brooklyn, 550,000 pounds; R. I. Interonics of Bay Shore, 11,000 pounds, and Axel Electronics of Jamaica, Queens, a subsidiary of the General Signal Corporation of 258 Park Avenue, 5,500 pounds.

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