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PCBs are a declining danger in Lake Michigan fish

CONTAMINATION of Lake Michigan fish with PCB [polychlorinated biphenyls] appears to be declining, so there's less need for fishermen to worry about catching and eating the big lake's trout and salmon this season.

Some fishermen, fishery biologists, and fishery management personnel are nervous because the federal Food and Drug Administration plans soon to announce "new tolerance levels for PCB in fish."

The Food and Drug Administration announced two years ago that it intended to drop the allowable limit from 5 parts per million to 2.

There's now very little PCB in Lake Michigan gamefish, which includes lake, brook, brown and rainbow trout, and coho, Chinook, and Atlantic salmon. [These are the oily species of fish which most readily accumulate large amounts of PBC, DDT, and dieldrin in their fatty tissues.

NOT ONLY IS there less PCB in Lake Michigan fish than there was five years ago, but there's going to be even less because the government in 1977 ordered industries to phase out the use of PCB. [Residual PCB, however, can get into Lake Michigan, enter the food chain, ultimately contaminate the gamefish, and thus endanger humans who consume the fish].



Tom McNally
Outdoor editor

Even when salmon or trout contain higher levels of PCB than the authorities feel is safe, humans probably won't be endangered if they eat no more than one meal a week of such fish. I suspect very few Lake Michigan anglers ever have more than one meal of salmon or trout per week.

The PCB contaminants pile up in the fatty tissues of fish, so removing these fatty areas is another safegurd against danger from PCB. Lake Michigan fishermen for years have been cleaning fish by cutting off the flabby belly meat [which isn't tasty anyway], as well as two strips of dark-colored flesh [behind the lateral sense line] running down the center on both sides of the fish.

WHEN SALMON and trout are dressed as described, and since the PCB content in our fish is lower, the chances of ingesting a dangerous amount of PCB by eating Lake Michigan fish are remote.

Recent tests on 20 Lake Michigan trout of all sizes showed levels of PCB to be "well within the federal guidelines of five parts per million," the Illinois Conservation Department reports. Fishery biologists in Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin have reported similar improvement in the contamination problem—not only in testing for PCB in fish, but also for the potentially dangerous pesticides, DDT, and dieldrin.

The trout sampled ranged in size from two to 11 pounds, and were caught in gill nets by Illinois fishery biologist Bruce Muench, a Lake Michigan specialist. Unskinned fillets of the fish were submitted to the Department of Public Health for toxic substance analyses, which were completed this winter. None of the fish tested contained more than 2.7 parts-per-million of PCB, and federal experts currently advise that it's fish containing five parts-per-million, or more, which are possibly dangerous when consumed in quantity.

AS RECENTLY as 1973, DDT was showing up in unacceptable levels in several species of Lake Michigan fish, but the latest tests show they contain no DDT, according to Public Health Department reports.

A combination of factors may be working to take DDT, PCB, and dieldrin out of the Lake Michigan food chain. Biologist Muench believes that, even though all those contaminants are "very durable substances," they may be sinking "into the sediment of Lake Michigan and thus out of the food chain."

Scientists believe that persons who ingest too much PCB may suffer eye, skin, and liver damage, birth defects, and, in the case of pregnant women, miscarriages.

• COHO SALMON are in the Calumet Harbor, and boat fishermen who go after them should have both Illinois and Indiana fishing licenses, plus salmon-trout stamps for both states. When fishing that area it's common to be in Illinois one moment and in Indiana water the next.

Conservation officers are not sympathetic with fishermen possessing the wrong licenses.

• FRIGID WEATHER again has slowed fishing, even though there's a lot of open water. Best bets for the coming weekend are Lake Michigan spots where warm water is discharged into the lake from power plants.

Try the Northern Indiana Public Service Company plant at Michigan City, Ind., or the NIPS plant in East Chicago.

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