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Preventing toxic spills discussed

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DULUTH — After three days of intensive discussions here on the toxicant-free future of Lake Superior, the debate had just begun.

The question was how states and the federal government can control the introduction — by accident or on purpose — of shipborne toxic and hazardous materials to the lake.

FOR ONCE, discussions regarding Lake Superior were not centered on Reserve Mining Co.'s daily discharge of 67,000 tons of taconite tailings, but rather on the immediate disaster that would accompany the discharge of spill of fiercely dangerous materials measured in pounds or gallons.

Some environmentalists feel that shipment of certain toxic materials either be banned outright or economically discouraged through unlimited fines and penalties in the event of a discharge.

But powerful shipping interests, oil companies and Canadian environmental regulators argued that the amount of petroleum products and other more toxic materials shipped is such a small percentage of the total lake tonnage (one-half of one per cent) that stringent regulations are unnecessary.

Much of the discussion centered on crude-oil spills, one of which recently turned a South American beach into a deadly tarpit.

Harvey H. Clare, chief of the environmental protection division of Imperial Oil Co. of Toronto, said, "The chances of crude oil being shipped on Lake Superior are about as remote as finding a snowball in hell."

The shipment of more refined products from a new Imperial terminal at the Duluth-Superior port, he added is a real possibility.

THE INTERNATIONAL conference, referring to Lake Superior as "a resource imperiled," was inspired last year by Grant Merritt, then director of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA) after Imperial announced plans to construct a $12-million terminal at the end of its Lakehead pipeline. The refined products would be shipped to other points on Lake Superior and along the Great Lakes.

"Is the resource imperiled?" Clare asked at one session of the conference. "I can't bring myself to believe that it is imperiled. We have ample laws to ensure the survival of the lake, despite the most unconscionable acts of its citizens and corporations."

Others feel legal remedies are woefully inadequate. Federal law provides that the discharger must pay the costs of cleanup — if the ship's real owner can be found. Civil penalties are limited to $5,000.

In 1973-1974, there were 45 reported petroleum spills on Lake Superior, 25 of which amounted to 8,000 gallons. That small an amount, industry representatives hinted, was really too small to get steamed up about.

But many conference participants were more steamed up about the long-term effects of nonpetroleum spills; spills and discharges of such materials as polychlorinated byphenyls (PCBs), cyanide and chlorine. They and dozens of other chemicals are among the most toxic substances man is able to commercially handle.

DEEP-WATER petroleum spills, for instance, drift ashore and can create incredible and almost intolerable contamination and loss of wildlife, but for a relatively brief period of time. As messy as it gets, the contaminated area eventually can be cleaned.

But introduction to the lake of a much smaller amount of a toxic material cannot be undone; the chemicals don't float on the surface to be vacuumed or skimmed off. They mix immediately with the water and can damage and destroy large areas of the lake and its aquatic inhabitants.

The present high-quality and clarity of Lake Superior (it is still possible to see the bottom in 30 feet of water) make it all the more vulnerable, two scientists said. Sunlight produces life in up to 300 feet of Lake Superior's water, and that makes life in most coastal-zone shipping lanes susceptible to destruction.

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