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PCB Pollutant Threatens Lake Ontario Fishing Crop

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Outdoors

Just when it appears that efforts to establish an exciting new salmon and trout sport fishery in Lake Ontario are about to be crowned with success, a new industrial degradation of the environment is identified that clouds the whole project.

The announcement late last week by Commissioner Ogden Reid of the Department of Environmental Conservation that it is inadvisable to eat striped bass and largemouth from the Hudson River is loaded with portent for local fishermen.

The villain now is a group of chemicals known as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Very similar in structure to such highly-dangerous chlorinated hydrocarbons as DDT, PCBs have been in use since 1930.

For a long time they were used in the manufacture of a variety of products including paint, printer's ink, papers and a number of plastic items. Since 1970, their use supposedly has been confined to so-called "closed system" purposes such as impregnating capacitors and condensers. The Encyclopedia Brittanica notes: "As are most highly chlorinated organic compounds, PCBs are toxic, especially to fishes; and their resistance to decomposition in soils and streams makes them a threat to wildlife."

They are also, naturally, a threat to humans. In Japan, a high content of PCBs in rice oil was blamed for the death of 16. A University of Wisconsin study revealed that 5 parts per million in rhesus monkeys caused massive reproductive failure.

The Federal Food and Drug Administration has ruled that fish containing more than 5 parts per million PCBs are unacceptable for human consumption. Recent sampling of fish in the Hudson River showed more than half above that level.

At Fort Edward and Hudson Falls, where General Electric has two manufacturing plants which are major users of PCBs, some minnows and panfish had up to 350 parts per million. One striped bass collected near the Tappan Zee Bridge had 37 parts per million.

What about the salmon and trout in Lake Ontario?

That's a question we asked Robert McManus, director of communications for DEC in Albany. The only analysis result he had was of a salmonid fish taken in 1972 which showed 10 parts per million.

However, McManus assured us that an intensive monitoring program is being instituted in all important state waters and that further data should be available soon.

Only manufacturer of PCBs in the U.S. is the Monsanto Chemical Co.

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