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Mondale, Humphrey join PCBs dispute

By Dan Wascoe Jr.
Staff Writer

Minnesota Senators Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale stepped into the growing controversy over polychlorinated biphenyls — PCBs — Monday.

Mondale said the chemical should be prohibited. Humphrey said it should be disposed of more safely.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA) said PCBs have been found in groundwater near Winona but that concentrations there are believed to be not dangerous.

PCBs, manufactured in this country only by the Monsanto Co., are used in plastics, printers ink, hydraulic fluid and electrical insulators. The Winona PCBs were traced to oil from electrical transformers deposited in a junkyard, said Don Jakes of the PCA.

The chemical has been found in Lake Pepin, other portions of the Mississippi River and Lake Superior. Authorities considered concentrations of the chemical so severe in Lake Pepin fish that commercial fishing was prohibited there earlier this summer. Later the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said carp fishing could resume if catches were limited to fish weighing five pounds or less.

The two DFL senators' comments on the chemical came yesterday morning during a briefing by the Metropolitan Waste Control Commission in St. Paul. Lonnie Dye, the commission's chief engineer, said that the agency's staff is helping search for the source of PCB emissions into the Mississippi River. He said Monsanto has refused to disclose who buys the chemical but that eventually the source will be traced.

Mondale and Humphrey expressed mild outrage at Dye's report.

"Can't you take them to court?" Humphrey asked. Dye said that is a possibility.

Mondale stated flatly that PCBs "ought to be prohibited" and said that at least "we ought to know" who's using the chemical.

After Dye said that PCBs are essential in the electrical-transformer industry, Humphrey said better methods for disposing of the chemical are needed. He referred to the search for a land disposal site for taconite wastes in northern Minnesota as an alternative to dumping them into Lake Superior.

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Jakes said in an interview that the agency at first was concerned about PCBs in the Winona junkyard because the groundwater was three to six feet beneath the surface and because municipal wells were not far away. But tests showed that most of the chemical from the spilled oil apparently remained in the ground, he said.

PCBs are believed to cause birth defects and reproductive failures in fish, birds and mammals and to cause cancer.

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Staff Photo by Regene Radniecki

Humphrey, Mondale tour plant

The two Democratic senators from Minnesota, Hubert H. Humphrey, left, and Walter H. Mondale, Monday toured the Pig's Eye sewage treatment plant in St. Paul, operated by the Metro Waste Control Commission.

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