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No PCBs Found Now In State Lake

Rail Spillage Not Polluting Pepin

PEPIN (AP) — Oil seeping from the site of a 1972 railroad accident provides no simple solution to the problem of chemical pollution plaguing Western Wisconsin's Lake Pepin, a state resource official said Thursday.

Stewart Durkee, a district engineer with the Department of Natural Resources at Eau Claire, said tests of water and soil samples taken July 11 found no evidence of the chemical pollutant polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, at the site.

"I was hoping in a way we'd find some PCBs; then we'd know where it is coming from," he said.

"I don't think you're going to find a simple solution," Durkee said, adding that he felt a major part of the PCB problem originated in the industrialized Twin Cities area upriver.

The rail accident occurred in May of 1972 at Stockholm, on the east shore of Lake Pepin, a widened portion of the Mississippi River, about 60 miles from St. Paul, Minn.

A tanker car carrying about 18,000 gallons of recycled oil and another carrying a lesser amount of a plasticizing substance dumped their contents in a derailment of a Burlington Northern freight train.

Area residents argued that the DNR, which handled the cleanup operation, had not adequately checked for possible pollution from PCBs, which are used in various industrial processes.

The Food and Drug Administration seized thousands of pounds of carp caught in Lake Pepin by commercial fishermen earlier this year after finding carp processed by a wholesaler contained more than the 5 parts per million of PCBs allowed by federal standards.

Interstate shipments of the fish were halted, and Minnesota health officials later warned against eating more than one meal per week of game fish from the lake.

Herman Mesbum, Pepin County's representative on the Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission, had raised questions about the oil seepage problem and asked why the DNR had not tested for PCBs earlier.

Durkee said the manufacturer of the plasticizer had told the DNR after the derailment that the substance did not contain PCBs, and he said the oil was not thought to be the type which would have PCBs in it.

Mesbum, named by the planning commission to a five-member committee studying pollution of Lake Pepin, said the panel was looking into the rail accident, as well as probing other pollution sources and assessing government efforts to solve water pollution problems.

"We're going to look into it and find out what each agency is doing," he said.

He noted that PCB pollution could be expected to have long-lasting effects, with the substance becoming more concentrated as it is passed from one link to another in the food chain of the wildlife community.

Mesbum also questioned whether the federal maximum levels for PCB concentrations in food had ever been proven hazardous.

Durkee, who had worked on the original cleanup at the derailment site, said workers took water samples in the area where the plasticizer car had dumped and sampled water and soil where the other tanker tipped.

He confirmed that oil continues to seep from the ground and into the lake at that site

"It probably will be seeping out for years to come," he added, but he said the oil was of a fine, penetrating type, easily dissipated in sunlight.

"The rate at which it's being released into the lake would not be environmentally damaging," he said.

Durkee said the tests, conducted at Madison, found no evidence of PCBs, although they were accurate to less than .1 part per billion for the plasticizer and to 10 parts per billion for the oil.

He said he would meet with area residents to outline the findings and determine if they felt further testing was necessary.