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Atlantic Salmon Deaths Linked to PCB?

By Tom Dammann

BOYNE CITY — The two year old mystery surrounding mortality of Atlantic Salmon in the Boyne River is gradually clearing.

Scientists are pointing the finger at PCB (polychlorinated biphenyal) contamination as the cause.

The conclusions are ominous in the eyes of Department of Natural Resources (DNR) fish biologists.

"After what I have seen in the Atlantic Salmon, I am reluctant to eat any quantity of fish from the Great Lakes. What are we doing to our world?" laments John Hnath, DNR fish patologist at the Wolf Lake Hatchery.

Hnath wrote the above in a letter covering a preliminary report by a Canadian specialist, Dr. Ron Sonstegaard, an expert on the effects of pollution on Great Lakes fish.

A researcher at the University of Guelph in Ontario, who has been studying cancer in Great Lakes fish, Dr. Sonstegard came here last summer to perform autopsies on Atlantics from the river.

In a preliminary report released by Stephen Swan, DNR biologist in charge of the Boyne River Atlantic Salmon Program, Dr. Sonstegard says that though results of all tests are not yet in, symptoms "seem to suggest a physiological and/or toxological problem."

He says that gonadal development of the Atlantic is unique in that it is a stress factor in the fish. If other stress is added the combination will be more than the fish can tolerate.

He says that "the lepis depots" (concentrations of fatty tissue) "are known sites of deposition of a number of environmental factors, in particular the polychlorinated hydrocarbons, i.e. PCB and DDT."

In sending a copy of Sonstegard's preliminary findings to Jack Hammond, who is in charge of the DNR's hatchery management section, Hnath stressed the conjectural nature of the report, but added that the Canadian scientist's "hypothesis of PCB problems certainly seems logical to me."

He then quoted Nathaniel Reed, assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, speaking at a PCB conference in Chicago last November:

"The omnipresence of PCB residues in our environment looms as a dark cloud casting an ominous shadow upon all of our fish and wildlife resource programs, which depend on environmental quality and healthy habitats," Reed said.

"The department cannot justify a salmon restoration program in any northeastern river system where fish will be subjected to PCB residues.

"The irony of our position today is that our left hand is spending millions of dollars and thousands of man years to establish a crucial resource, while our right hand renders each new growth of this resource malignant. Our new resource will not only self-destruct but can place the human population in danger," Ree concluded.

Atlantic Salmon have been planted here each spring since 1972. They swim downstream into Lake Charlevoix and then into Lake Michigan.

The summer of 1974 was the first year they were mature enough to return to the Boyne River to spawn, but all died.

However, last summer, Swan and his crew were able to get 15,000 eggs from four females before they died. Nine thousand fry hatched from these in the Wolf Lake Hatchery, and died later. Results of laboratory tests of 15,000 of these are not yet available.

The fact that there is no mortality problem with the brood stock at Wolf Lake further convinces the specialists that the contaminant is in Lakes Charlevoix and Michigan.