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Lake Superior trout are tainted

Industrial contaminant PCB is blamed

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LANSING — Tests of lake trout taken from Lake Superior — the cleanest of the Great Lakes — show surprisingly high levels of the industrial contaminant PCB.

While the sampling is only in the early stages, state officials say they are "definitely disturbed" over the finding because there is little industry along the Michigan shoreline of the lake from which PCB could find its way into the water.

It's possible the chemical could have originated from Canadian sources along the north end of Superior.

"We're puzzled over the source but our data is sparse and the analysis is incomplete," said John Hesse, a water quality control researcher for the State Water Resources Commission.

PCB stands for polychlorinated biphenyl, a chemical compound largely used in the electrical industry as a transformer fluid, and which also has been used as a hydraulic fluid (It is unrelated to PBB, another chemical — used as a fire retardant — that poisoned livestock in Michigan when it was accidentally mixed last year with animal feed.)

Federal health authorities have set a limit of five parts per million on the amount of PCB in the flesh of fish that is permissible for human consumption.

Most of the fish tested showed PCB in quantities over the limit of five parts per million.

The limit was set after residents of a small Japanese village became seriously ill in 1970 when PCB accidentally was mixed with fish oil. Hundreds of Japanese became very ill with skin and internal disorders, and impaired vision.

Checks by researchers turned up PCB contaminants in coho salmon and other species in Lake Michigan, which led state officials to warn against eating fish more than once a week.

The sampling in Lake Superior, however, startled Michigan officials.

"We never turned up any traces of PCB in the sampling of water we took of rivers emptying into Superior," said Hesse of the State Water Resources Commission.

The lake trout sampled were of the cisowet strain, which contain more fat tissue that can accumulate contaminants such as PCB.

Most of those sampled were taken near Isle Royale, a federal island park in the western end of the the lake.

Hesse speculates the contaminants could have come from industrial sources in Thunder Bay, an Ontario community northwest of Isle Royale.

Along with state agencies, the sampling is coordinated with the FDA, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

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