B6 The Saginaw NEWS THURSDAY, MARCH 18, 1982

State may set new limits on PCB levels in fish

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News Lansing Bureau

State officials are pondering whether to reduce the allowable limit of PCBs in commercially sold fish from the current 5 parts per million (ppm) to 2 parts per million.

LANSING — The health effects of toxic PCBs — which virtually all Michigan citizens harbor in their bodies along with a host of other contaminants — may not show up for years, state health experts said this week.

PCBs, which are chemical "cousins" to the fire retardant PBB, were widely dumped into Michigan waterways until only a few years ago. Speakers at a Michigan State University symposium on PCBs said most Michigan residents take in the chemical by eating PCB-tainted Great Lakes fish.

But the effect of the chemical on human health "may not manifest itself until 20 or 30 years from now," said Dollus Walker, director of the state Department of Public Health.

PCBs are a suspected cause of cancer in humans — but that fact may not be a major worry, health officials said, since most citizens harbor only small amounts of it in their blood and fat tissue.

However, even small doses of the chemical "could prove to be a problem over time," cautioned Jerry B. Hook, director of MSU's Center for Environmental Toxicology. Chemical experts still do not have enough evidence to link small amounts of PCBs with human health problems, although large doses of the chemical can be deadly, he said.

Against that backdrop, state officials are pondering whether to reduce the allowable limit of PCBs in commercially sold fish from the current 5 parts per million (ppm) to 2 parts per million.

Lowering the standard could reduce health risks to Michigan citizens who buy Great Lakes fish in restaurants and grocery stores, according to state health experts. Until the health effects of PCBs are more widely known, they say, Michigan must take a "better safe than sorry" approach to the problem.

But the tighter limits could hurt the Michigan commercial fishing industry, which would be blocked from selling fish which don't meet the standard. A 2-ppm standard could deal a $20 million blow to the state's economy, one commercial fishing authority said.

"Sportsmen are not going to stop fishing," warned Thomas L. Washington, executive director of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC). "You'd have to scare them to death before they stop fishing."

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, were widely used in industry until the mid-1970s. The chemical found heavy use, for example, as a fire retardant in hydraulic fluids.

PCBs are renowned for their chemical "toughness" — that is, their ability to resist chemical breakdown in the environment. Until recently, in fact, ships which cruised the Great Lakes were coated with paint which was laced with the chemical.

But that same "toughness" is now a major worry for environmentalists and health experts, who say PCBs dumped into waterways years ago may linger for decades to come.

The MUCC's Washington said state officials are doing far too little to warn sportsmen of the dangers of eating their Great Lakes catch.

Health officials warn that children, pregnant women and women who are nursing or expecting to bear children should avoid eating most Great Lakes fish, especially the larger species. Other sportsmen are advised to limit their consumption to one meal a week, and to trim the fish of skin and fat deposits before cooking it.

MONS 011552