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PCB's--Making the Best Of A Bad Situation

BY Linda Weimer

There seems to be universal agreement right now about the dangers posed by an infamous group of chemical compounds known as PCBs or polychlorinated biphenyls.

They are known to be toxic to man as witnessed by the 1968 deaths of five people in Japan and the poisoning of hundreds of others who had used cooking oil contaminated with the chemical.

Closer to home at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, it has been shown that PCBs cause severe health problems in monkeys fed five parts per million PCBs, a level now considered safe for human consumption by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

What has made these case studies more alarming is the recent discovery that PCB levels are increasing in fish caught in Lake Michigan and the Upper Mississippi River.

Fish like the large lake trout and salmon have been shown to be quick to pick up PCBs through their gills, fins and skin and to be very slow in eliminating them. Presently, fish containing up to 50 ppm PCBs are being recovered from the lake.

As a result, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture has curtailed the commercial sale of these fish and the state Department of Natural Resources has warned sportsmen to limit their intake of such fish to one meal per week.

Beyond that, there are a number of other things that the sportsman can do to make his catch safer to eat, according to food scientists David Sruiber and Robert Lindsay of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"You can eliminate some of the PCBs in cleaning the fish," Sruiber notes. "Take the head and the tail off and then section your fish. Remove the belly flap, where you have tremendous amounts of fat. Then remove the fat along the lateral line and the fatty portions along the dorsal line around the fish's belly."

According to both Sruiber and Lindsay, the major harbinger of PCBs is fat.

"Remove as much fatty materials from the fish as possible," Lindsay urges. "Tests show that these areas will usually have about ten times the levels of PCBs found in the lean tissue.

The big, full grown lake trout and salmon are the worst, he says. They contain the greatest percentage of fat, varying anywhere from eight to 20 percent.

Once the fish are cleaned, there is still more that can be done to reduce the PCB content.

In cooking it, the scientists say, the point again is to get rid of the fat. For this reason, they recommend broiling, barbecuing or baking the fish.

"If you want to fry it, go ahead," says Sruiber. "Just be sure to get rid of all the drippings -- don't use them for anything."

"You can't eliminate PCBs," Sruiber explains, "but you can do a lot to reduce their amounts if you clean and cook the fish properly."

How long fishermen will have to go through these steps remains a mystery -- the big question right now is how persistent are PCBs going to be.

"Based on evidence to date, it looks like they're terrifically persistent," says Lindsay, "and unless something is done to restrict their entry into the environment, the problem is going to get worse. It could even threaten the Great Lakes sports fishery."

Nevertheless, both lindsay and Sruiber believe that before things get to such a point, state and federal agencies will take action to restrict the use and discharge of PCBs. In fact, the DNR is currently holding hearings on PCBs with an eye towards establishing discharge limits for Wisconsin waters.

Whatever the outcome, PCBs will likely be present in fish for some time to come and Sruiber and Lindsay's advice on how to cook and clean PCB-ridden fish will remain one good way to make the best of a bad situation.