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Thousands Of Fish To Be Destroyed In Park Lakes

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Thousands of fish in five St. Louis park lakes will be destroyed tomorrow because a federal agency apparently did not have the authority to impound a load of carp suspected of being contaminated.

The fish will be poisoned and removed from the lakes by Missouri Department of Conservation workers.

Besides the carp that will be destroyed, hundreds of blue gills, largemouth bass, channel catfish and bullheads (many of them stocked in the lakes years ago) will die because of the load of contaminated fish.

The load of carp, which was released last Thursday into lakes in Willmore, Fairground, O'Fallon and Hyde parks, was later found to contain dangerous levels of a toxic industrial chemical, polychlorinated biphenyl or PCB.

The industrial chemical, used as a coolant in electrical transformers, is a product of Monsanto Co., which is based here. The fish were from a Green Bay, Wis., commercial fishery.

"We're scratching our heads as much as they are (Wisconsin Natural Resources officials)," said William B. Poppenberge, manager of product acceptability at Monsanto.

What is bewildering to officials of the Conservation Department, which stocks fish in St. Louis park lakes under the Urban Fishing Program, is why United States Food and Drug Administration inspectors did not hold the shipment of carp in Green Bay until results of their tests were known.

"It is my understanding that the FDA does not have the authority to impound fish that are destined for live-release," said Charles A. Purbeck, head of the state fisheries division in Jefferson City. "Had they been dressed for sale, then they would have had the authority, a FDA official in Kansas City told me."

As a result, conservation workers unknowingly released the contaminated fish into the two lakes in Willmore Park and lakes in the three other city parks.

Purbeck warned that persons should not eat any fish found floating in the five lakes. The lakes will be closed and signs have been posted explaining the problem. The lakes should be restocked in about two weeks, he said.

Federal inspectors, who had suspected that abnormally high levels of PCB might be present in the shipments from the Green Bay fishery, took a few sample fish from the load bound for St. Louis. It was several days later before they confirmed their suspicions. Conservation officials in Missouri were told Tuesday night that the fish must be destroyed.

When asked why the commercial fish contractor in Green Bay had not warned Missouri officials about the possibility of contamination, Purbeck said: "That's a very good question. We purchase our fish from a contractor in Imperial, Mo., who in turn buys them from the man who catches them in Green Bay.

Meanwhile, a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources official said the chemical might have come from the sewage of nearby industrial plants. The fish are taken from the bay at Green Bay — on Lake Michigan — near the mouth of the Fox River, a highly industrialized area.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture has ordered samples of carp bound for retail markets to be tested for PCB levels.

Moreover, other state authorities will hold hearings on the use of PCB in Wisconsin, and the chemical may be banned in the state, an official said.

"We find it hard to understand how this could have happened," said Poppenberge of Monsanto.

"We don't think people could eat enough of the fish to trigger toxic conditions," said Purbeck.

"But PCB is cumulative. It builds in the body and is eliminated very slowly. We're closing the lakes as a precautionary measure.

The Food and Drug Administration office in Minneapolis notified officials here of the PCB problem after tests had disclosed the presence of 20 parts of the chemical for every 1,000,000 parts of fish flesh. The maximum acceptable level of PCB, agency guidelines show, is five parts per 1,000,000.

Fish will be skimmed from lake surfaces early tomorrow morning as they die of the poison, Rotenone, which is a special fish-kill substance used by conservation officials. It suffocates the fish by clogging their gills so that oxygen cannot pass through.

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