The Florida Times-Union

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★ ★ ★ JACKSONVILLE, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 1972 All Other Departments 791-4111 Circulation 358-2121

MIAMI RIVER RATED U.S. HIGHEST IN P.C.B.

From Wire Services

MIAMI — The Miami River, which [illegible] from Lake Okeechobee through the Everglades and to Biscayne Bay in downtown Miami, had the highest concentration of a deadly, DDT-like compound called "PCB" of any river in the nation during recent tests.

This was the conclusion of a U.S. Geological Survey study that was released Tuesday. The scientists said all the contaminated waterways in South Florida had concentrations of PCBs well above the so-called safe standard set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, but they added that the concentrations are decreasing steadily and present no threat at present to public health.

PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — are a group of industrial compounds chemically similar to DDT. The chemical compounds have been used for [illegible] years in components of electric transformers, paints, ink [illegible] and as plasticizers.

"PCBs are extremely toxic in high concentrations and we know they move through the aquatic food webs and are concentrated in the process, just like DDT," said government geologist Herman Feltz.

"So far, we've only begun to investigate the toxic effects of PCBs, but it looks as if it could be much more of a problem than DDT," he said. "We already know they are even more persistent than DDT."

The government scientists found the concentration of PCBs in the sediment in the Miami River was 3,200 parts per billion. That's 290 times the level recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency.

A spokesman for the USGS office in Miami said the 3,200 parts per billion figure was found early in 1971 in sediment taken from the bottom of the Miami River.

But samples taken a few months later showed that concentration had dropped to 600 to 900 parts per billion, and another sample taken recently showed it was down to 90 parts," the spokesman said. "It's apparently leaching out pretty steadily."

The study released by USGS did not include samples of waters in the industrial areas of Florida like Tampa, Jacksonville and Pensacola, where scientists suspect the level of PCBs may be even higher than in South Florida.

(In Jacksonville, Hamilton S. Oven, an engineer with the state Bioenvironmental Services division said, "As far as I know no one has ever measured the PCB content in the water here. PCBs are used in plastic manufacture and are often a precipitate after incineration. There is little, if any, plastic manufactured here and the city has shut down its incinerator. But the compound is also dumped by paint manufacturers and by painters and ink manufacturers. As soon as our new [illegible] is completed, we will be able to measure the concentration here.")

Most of the PCBs are injected into the environment through domestic and industrial sewage disposal. The chemical compound is virtually non-degradable and its potential danger to the environment was not discovered until 1966.

Feltz noted that the Miami River, until recently was the dumping place of much of the area's industrial waste, as is the case in many other major waterways in South Florida.

The Monsanto Co. is the only producer of PCBs in the nation and three years ago an accidental spill of a PCB heat exchange compound into Escambia Bay in the Florida Panhandle killed off bottom-dwelling organisms in a wide area and officials say traces of the compound are still found in the bay's marine life.

In 1968 after a PCB contamination of rice oil in Japan, more than 1,000 persons were treated for the poisoning, which produced an acne-like outbreak of skin sores.

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