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High concentration of PCBs in harbor

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Correspondent

HIGHLAND PARK — The concentration of the toxic industrial chemical polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) in Waukegan harbor is the highest ever found in one spot on earth.

What, if any, danger this poses to people eating fish and drinking water from this area and the rest of Lake Michigan is not yet fully documented, according to Brad Marion, assistant director of the Lake Michigan federation.

Marion and others discussed the current situation regarding PCB's in the harbor last Wednesday, July 18, at the Lake Michigan Awareness days sponsored by the Lake Michigan federation and the park district of Highland Park.

PCB'S ENTERED Waukegan harbor from the early 1950s until 1972, from the use of the hydraulic fluid Pyrdraul by the Outboard Marine Corp. (OMC). Outboard Marine representatives disclaim any knowledge of the chemical constituency of Pydraul, manufactured by the Monsanto Co., when it was used.

In 1976, the U.S. Environmental Protection agency found high concentrations of PCBs in the harbor, especially in the North Ditch area. Several lawsuits, filed by the EPA, OMC, and the Monsanto Co., are attempting to discover who is responsible for the presence of the PCBs and bring about the clean-up of the harbor, if that is possible.

Research still is being done by the EPA on the toxicity of PCBs and is scheduled to end by the end of this year, according to EPA representative Kaye Jacobs.

ONE STUDY THAT has been done, placed fish eggs in water taken from the harbor and tested any changes in the growth of the fish that may have resulted from the presence of PCBs.

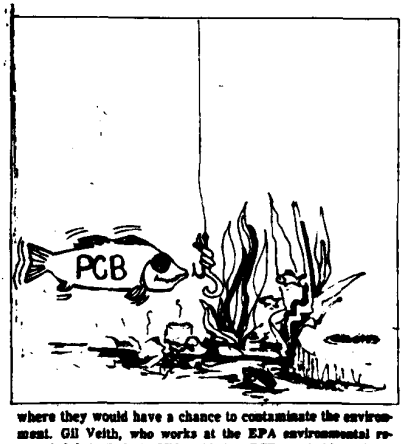
A federal judge ruled Monday, July 23, that the results of the test could be released after an abstract drawn up by the EPA is approved by Outboard Marine.

There is, however, information that still is in litigation, which cannot be given out.

The EPA wants the information released because of its public health impact.

"There are fishermen who are out there (Waukegan harbor) every day, and they take their catches home and eat them or distribute them to their friends," said Jacobs.

PCBs have been banned from use in open systems,



where they would have a chance to contaminate the environment. Gil Veith, who works at the EPA environmental research lab in Duluth, MN, said that PCBs probably will act much like the pesticide DDT did when it was banned.

"The lake should clean itself up to some extent without use," said Veith. "If we're able to get rid of the major sources of PCB, the levels (found in lake fish) should drop."

HOW TO GET RID of the PCBs in Waukegan harbor has not been decided. PCBs are a heavy fluid and researchers believe that most of the chemical has settled to the bottom of the harbor. Therefore, dredging the harbor may enhance the problem by suspending the PCB particles in the water where

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they would more easily be picked up by aquatic animals, said Marion.

Other possible solutions to the problem range from doing nothing about it to draining and concreting the harbor, said Marion.

If, and when, a solution is found, there still might be the controversy of whose responsibility it is to clean up the harbor.

"We have no funds," said Jacobs. "That's why it has been the EPA's policy to place the responsibility of clean-up on the companies who put the chemical there."

Jacobs said the EPA has 150 other hazardous sites throughout the country to investigate and only can afford to do research.

"IT'S DIFFICULT to promise anything because the answer doesn't stem from the U.S. EPA," she said. "President Carter has cut back the budget."

Hugh Thomas, legal counsel for OMC, said that "we stand ready and willing to pay our fair share of remedial action" to clean up the PCB problem. "We are not the only body that bears responsibility in this matter."

Thomas said that Monsanto Co. and the EPA also have responsibility for the PCB problem, but that OMC is determined to see the harbor eventually is cleaned up.

"Our business depends on clean water and a clean environment," said Thomas. "We are committed to a clean environment."

IT IS NOT KNOWN how long the legal litigations will take before the harbor is cleaned up, but Jacobs said, "We're going as fast as we can."

Thomas said it may take more than just EPA figures stating PCB concentration in fish to get the clean-up done.

"We may have to get to the point where someone is injured before something can be done about it," he said.