PCB contamination is not simple problem

By Tom Young

Poly-Chlorinated Biphenols, here the concern of about 75 persons here Tuesday night, and the problem the PCBs cause are as complicated as the name.

The gathering, in the Wabasha middle school, was set up by the SouthEastern Minnesota Assistance and Planning Organization to give area people, especially the commercial fishermen a chance to discuss the PCB problem with the experts working on it.

About forty commercial fishermen have hung up their nets and 60,000 pounds of carp have been buried as a result of the halt on interstate shipping by the federal Food and Drug Administration.

Joel Shilling of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA) fielded the questions Tuesday night.

WHAT IS PCB?

PCBs, there's about 15 different ones but only one or two are of area concern, are industrial chemicals which are added to products to make them less flamable. It's in insulation around transformers to make the fluid less flamable. It's in hydrolic fluids and oils for lubricants where heat resistant properties are needed. There is one original source for PCBs in the United States: Monsanto Corporation in St. Louis, Mo. but Italy also produces them.

HOW MUCH IS BAD?

In 1972 only 5,000 pounds of PCBs were produced for the various industrial uses. Organisms can take them up in parts per trillion of water, so small it can't be measured. As minnows eat organism and fish eat minnows and people eat fish, the PCBs are concentrated and the seriousness increases. The commercial carp banned by the FDA was contaminated to 5 parts per million.

In a University of Wisconsin study monkeys were fed a continuous diet of food contaminated at 5 parts per million and developed liver disease, skin problems, reproductive problems and stillborn babies. The National Water Qualities Laboratory at Duluth did a study which showed the reproductive qualities of Walleye are impaired.

WHERE IS IS COMING FROM?

This is still unknown, Shilling answered, and it's what he and his meager staff of two are working on. They have checked the discharges of the major industrial users above Lake Pepin and have not found a present source. It has shown up in the tests at Red Wing and Hastings, and also at the St. Paul location which is above most of the most possible sources. Concentrations have been found in fish up to Elk River, but the extent of fish migration makes a more northerly source than that uncertain.

There are two possibilities for the current contamination: A large recent dumping of the chemical, or the possibility that the minute amounts present since the early 70's are concentrating and now showing up. That second possibility would be the most critical, and the hardest to control. Tests are still underway to determine which.

There is a possibility that walleye will be brought into the controversy. The walleys will take on a greater concentration than the carp, and it was only because the carp were being sold under interstate commerce regulations that they were condemned. Shilling said the PCA is talking about recommending a limit on consumption of walleyes from Lake Pepin and the Mississippi, similar to a limit imposed on fish contaminated with mercury a few years ago.



A CONCERNED but willing-to-listen attitude prevailed at the public meeting on contamination Tuesday.

PUBLIC REACTION?

A number of persons spoke out at the meeting Tuesday, some of them angry, others questioning.

The dumping by large cities, especially St. Paul came in for criticizm, one women feeling that small towns have been pressured and responded better than cities in solving their waste problems.

A fisherman asked "should we burn our nets and go down to St. Louis for a job at Monsanto?"

A Bay City man who was active in the antiPpolution efforts in the 1960's said that progress was made then by convening a contamination enforcement conference, and said it's the only way to get something done to stop the industrial dumping in the river.

Shilling told the audience that the one thing everybody concerned can do is write their congressman and state and federal officials and urge action on the problem. Now is especially a good time because a toxic and hazardous waste bill is underway in congress, and the PCB problem can be dealt with by the proposal.

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