MT. CLEMENS, MICH.
EAST SIDE
COMMUNITY NEWS
WEEKLY

JAN 2 9 1976

Mercury pollution joined by PCBs

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Panax News Service

Mercury pollution is still keeping commercial fishing nets off Lake St. Clair, but a new contaminant — PCBs — may restrict market netting in the future.

Ontario's Ministry of Environment last week reported results of six years of mercury monitoring on Lake St. Clair which shows a significant downward trend in contamination levels.

Ontario closed Lake St. Clair to commercial fishing in 1971 after mercury levels in the lake's fish were found to be as high as 23 parts per million. The minimum standard for safe sale in Ontario, as well as the U.S., is .5 parts per million.

LAST YEAR, seven commercial operators previously employing some 40 persons on the lake requested additional tests. Those samples revealed a mercury content ranging from 3.7 to .13 parts per million.

"The mean mercury levels of those fish are still for the most part above the acceptable .5 parts per million set by the government of Canada," said Environment Minister George Kerr. "But we can be confident now that a trend toward reduced mercury levels has been established."

"We are still some distance from the point where this commercial fishery can be restored to productive use," said Minister of Natural Resources Leo Bernier. "But we can be reasonably sure that day will come. There is light at the end of the tunnel."

In December, however, Canada's federal government set a new standard for polychlorinated biphynols (PCBs) at two parts per million. Canada had never set a formal limit on PCB content in fish, but for commercial purposes had adhered to the U.S. standard of 5 parts per million since [illegible].

most Canadian-netted fish are sold in the U.S.

IF MERCURY pollution eventually fails to keep Lake St. Clair's commercial netters in check, PCB contamination might.

"We have never conducted any PCB studies on Lake St. Clair because it has been closed to commercial fishing," said an employe of the Canadian Fish Inspection Station in Wheatley, Ont. "We can be fairly certain, though, that there is some there."

While mercury contamination resulted from chemical plant discharges in Sarnia which have since been shut down and destroyed under Canadian government orders, PCB pollution results from the manufacturer of paper and plastics and the use of the chemical as a stable hydraulic fluid and in electrical transformers.

A bill in the Michigan legislature sponsored by Rep. David E. Bonior, D-Mount Clemens, seeks to ban the manufacture and commercial use of the chemical in the state since it has been found in excessive levels in fish from Lakes Michigan, Huron and Superior. Federal regulations for controlling PCBs are still pending.

IN LAKE ERIE, where the largest freshwater commercial fishing fleet in the world operates off the Canadian shore, mercury has been only a slight problem, but the new Canadian PCB standards may prevent netting of salmon and walleye, considered commercial species in Canada.

Macomb County sportsmen have blamed commercial netting of walleye in Lake Erie for a poor migratory run of the species into Lake St. Clair last summer. Lake Erie, along with the Thames River, are the major spawning areas for walleye in the St. Clair system.

"Our tests show that PCBs will have only a minor effect on our walleye harvest," said the Wheatley fish inspector, "but as far as salmon goes, it could be significant."

MONS 032931