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Lake Michigan committee asks nationwide PCB ban

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LANSING — Because of continued high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) in the Great Lakes, a group representing Michigan and three other states has asked the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to seek a nationwide ban on the sale, distribution and use of PCB.

The request was made to Francis Mayo, Chicago, administrator of the EPA's Region 5, which includes the Great Lakes states.

The EPA also was asked to explore the possibility of using environmentally safe substitutes for PCB.

The recommendation to Mayo was made by the new Lake Michigan Toxic Substance Committee, which is comprised of representatives of Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Great Lakes Laboratory and the EPA.

The committee studied the PCB situation after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) seized several Lake Michigan fish shipments for having PCB concentrations above the levels permitted by the FDA. Donald Healton, Great Lakes regional director for the FDA, also had declared that interstate shipments of Great Lakes fish would be halted this year if significantly high levels of PCB were found. He termed the content in Lake Michigan chubs, coho salmon and lake trout "dangerously high."

Dr. Howard A. Tanner, director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), has written Mayo asking what he proposes to do in response to the committee request. And DNR officials have met with the EPA in Washington.

William G. Turney, chief of the DNR's Bureau of Water Management, told the state Natural Resources Commission (NRC) Thursday that EPA officials "appreciate" the problem but really don't know what to do about it. It was called to their attention as far back as 1971 by Dr. Ralph W. Purdy, deputy director in charge of the DNR's Environmental Protection Branch. Turney said Purdy received a "polite but nonresponsive answer."

Turney said there is some question whether EPA has the authority to call such a ban. It would have under a toxic materials bill that has been in Congress for the past several years, he said, but the bill won't be enacted in the near future.

As a result, Turney said, any immediate ban probably will have to be pursued at the state level.

Turney told the NRC that continued high levels of PCB and dieldrin plague certain Great Lakes fish and show no evidence of decline.

PCB remains high despite the fact that the Monsanto Chemical Co., sole U.S. producer, said a few years ago that it would discontinue sales for use as hydraulic and heat-transfer fluids.

And Turney said dieldrin continues as a "nagging" problem. Dieldrin, used in southwestern Michigan in 1971, still is leaching into state waters, he said.

In April, Turney said, the FDA made its first seizure of fish from Michigan waters because of contamination from dieldrin. Most production of dieldrin and aldrin was suspended by the EPA last August, Turney said. It made exceptions for three minor uses. The chemicals were placed in restricted-use categories by Michigan and Wisconsin about three years ago, he explained.

Turney said the level of dieldrin can be expected to decline, as have levels of DDT and mercury. DDT levels exceed federal limits now only in large lake trout, he said, and mercury is a problem mostly in walleyed pike in Lake St. Clair.

But he believes PCB represent a serious problem, in view of the fact voluntary restrictions on certain uses have not changed the level of contamination in state waters.

Most large discharges have been to Lake Huron, Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie, he said. Discharges to Lake Michigan are small, but diffuse, Turney said, and are difficult to trace by current techniques.

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