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PCBs in salmon decrease

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — In what may be the start of a new trend, amounts of the toxic pollutant known as PCBs found in Lake Michigan coho salmon have decreased for the first time since monitoring of the chemical began in 1972.

"This could mean our efforts are paying off, that PCB is on the way out," said protection bureau chief William Turney of the state Department of Natural Resources, which reported the decrease Thursday.

That would be good news for sports fishermen and fish eaters, who have been advised to restrict their consumption of some lake fish because of PCB concentrations.

Before restrictions on the sale of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) in 1971, chemicals of the group were commonly used to absorb heat in capacitors, transformers and hydraulic fluids. PCB also was used as an additive in carbonless reproduction papers.

Monsanto, Inc., the sole U.S. manufacturer of PCB, restricted sales of the chemical after officials determined that it posed a health hazard to humans and animals.

Many birds died after eating PCB-contaminated fish from the lake. PCB was found in the brains of dying gulls in concentrations as high as 2,600 parts per million (ppm) — 10 times what wildlife researchers view as a lethal dose.

There are no records of negative human health effects from PCB consumption in this country, the DNR has said.

Turney said a September report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service showed PCB levels in adult salmon taken last fall from east-central Lake Michigan at 9.21 ppm compared with 10.77 ppm measured in a similar catch from the same area in 1975.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has established 5 ppm as the maximum allowable concentration of PCB in food for human consumption.

The report also lists PCB level declines in Lake Michigan chubs and lake trout.

"Perhaps the days when we can stop advising people to limit consumption of Great Lakes fish will come sooner than we've imagined," Turney said.

Many Great Lakes states have advised sport fishermen to limit consumption of fish such as salmon, lake trout, steelhead and brown trout to no more than one meal per week and have told women of childbearing age not to consume any of the fish.

A state law which took effect in April prohibits the manufacture, sale or use of PCB in Michigan for anything other than transformers and capacitors.

Monsanto has said it will halt all PCB sales in October.

The federal report also said DDT concentrations among the east-central Lake Michigan salmon and chubs and lake trou caught off Saugatuck continued to decline.

PCB has also been found in huge quantities in the Hudson River. Because of the presence of the contaminant, New York State has imposed a ban on fishing for most species.