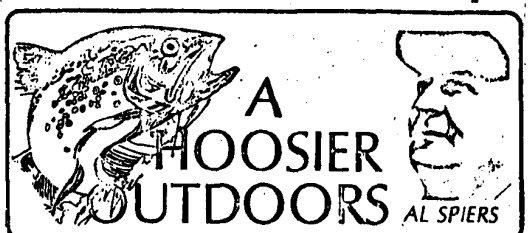
Lake Michigan fish poisoned? . . . 'No way'

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For reasons that defy understanding, some of Uncle Sam's overzealous bureaucrats are trying once again to persuade us that Lake Michigan's fish are poisoned.

If they're right, I'm dead — or at least debilitated. This fella isn't going to throw away any coho, chinook, lakers, browns or steelies. They'll grace our table as often as I can catch 'em and Lois will cook 'em.

And when they come visiting, we'll feed Lake Michigan fish to children and grandson without hesitation or anxiety.

The latest huckster of overblown environmental frights is Donald Healton, the Food & Drug Administration's Chicago region director, who said interstate shipments may soon be banned if Lake Michigan fish continue to show high levels of a scary-sounding "toxic" chemical called polychlorinated biphenyl, or PCB for short.

Healton said these levels are "dangerously high" in chubs 5.5 to 6 parts-per-million against FDA's 5-ppm limit), in coho (12 ppm) and in Lake trout (20 ppm). For sport anglers, who are beyond FDA's control (thank goodness!) he had this ominous advice: "I certainly wouldn't eat them!"

To its shame, the press pulped this bait like a fat dumb coho takes a red Rapala in spring, spreading the scare story far and wide without applying that first critical question.

Plenty of questions should have been asked. For one, were FDA's PCB readings taken from whole or cleaned fish? It makes a powerful difference. PCB tends to collect in fat and organs. Analyze a whole fish and you get a high reading. Analyze a skinned fillet — even from a big, old, pot-bellied lake trout — and you get a negligible reading.

Another question: Is PCB a newly-discovered peril, as many assumed from the FDA's aggravated concern and the story's wide circulation? Not at all. It's been known and watched for several years, all around Lake Michigan, by good and dedicated public health people — including Indiana's. Why haven't they spoken up? Well, primarily because few are genuinely alarmed by PCB levels in lake or fish.

One of Indiana's best experts in the field wryly confessed that on a trip to Michigan City he had, indeed, become slightly ill after eating smoked lake trout.

"But it was from gluttony, not PCB," he chuckled. "They were so darned delicious I just plain overate."

Yes, he knew exactly what PCB levels were in the lake trout he ate. It didn't bother him at all.

The most cogent question that demands asking is this: Who decided PCB's "safe" level in fish is 5-ppm, and on what scientific basis?

Put that poser to DNR and state board of health experts and they'll invariably reply with some vagueness, "Well, that's the FDA standard...so we abide."

Put it to the FDA and you get lost in a jungle of bureaucratic buck-passing and gobbledegook.

As nearly as honest, persistent seeking can ascertain, the truth seems to be that this is one more of Uncle Sam's arbitrary standards, derived partly from environmental emotionalism and long on the side of caution born of ignorance.

"We don't know for sure, therefore we must follow ultra-careful guidelines," is the underlying philosophy.

If no other factors were involved, that would be solid good sense. But countless other factors are involved and must be considered.

Should we, for example, stop all Lake Michigan fishing and fish-eating until PCB and its effects are fully and precisely understood — even though no clear evidence of peril is present?

Obviously not — yet that is essentially what the more zealous bureaucrats and environmental extremists would have us do.

Just as obviously, it's past time to take issue with such nonsense and fight back. Northern Indiana anglers did it when EPA tried to force Northern Indiana Public Service Co. to stop the clean warmed-water discharges that help concentrate salmon and trout in spring and late fall. Half that battle has been won, and the other half seems likely to be.

In the FDA case, Michigan's DNR — to its great credit — came out swinging hard and fast.

Harold Tanner, new director, called the FDA's blather "misleading...and astonishing." He said joint studies in Michigan — which have included the FDA's Detroit office — don't support Healton's findings.

"We will immediately review this new information with various agencies to clear up the confusion that may result from the FDA statement," said Tanner.

He also said the statement "unnecessarily alarms the public and jeopardizes the commercial fishing industry."

When you consider the polite protocol that customarily prevails between such agencies, Tanner's talk bluntly blasts Healton and his overblown nonsense out of water.

And that's as it should be!

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