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Tar Heel Editors Speak:

Commission ignored danger of lake poisoned by PCBs

The Charlotte Observer

"The available data indicate that PCBs may cause several adverse effects in humans, mammals, birds and aquatic organisms at extremely low concentrations. ... Exposure of humans and other animals to any level of PCBs should be deemed significant. ...

— Statement of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, May, 1978.

It doesn't appear North Carolina's Environmental Managment Commission was even aware of the EPA's judgment on the chemical PCB (polychlorinated byphenyls) when it voted in November 1979 to let PCB-contaminated water flow for five months from a Raleigh company's waste ponds into a lake in a public park.

Now the company, Ward Transformer Co., is being sued by owners of an adjacent 79-acre tract, and state officials say the property is so contaminated with PCBs that much of the soil will have to be removed. In its outrageous 1979 decision, the state commission appears to have disregarded its duty to protect the public from such risks.

Given the federal view of PCBs and the state law prohibiting PCB contamination of more than one part per billion in surface water, how could the commission come to the judgment expressed by one commissioner that there was no "significant health problem"? How could some commissioners and state experts shrug off the risk by noting that the company had been contaminating the area for "20 years anyway" and that "PCBs are pervasive in the environment"?

People could die as a result of the commission's irresponsible decision: people who have fished in the lake — which is permitted — and those who may have violated the prohibition against swimming there, and those who may unsuspectingly have drunk water from nearby wells.

It may be impossible ever to know the full consequences of the commission's decision. It's difficult to pinpoint the exact level of dosage that's harmful or to know whether long exposure to small doses is as bad as one exposure to a large amount. And it's often difficult to say, years later, what caused a particular cancer or other disease.

Scientists are trying to answer these questions. Until they do, the public must rely on its official agencies to keep exposure to minimal levels. With the N.C. Environmental Management Commission's record, how can North Carolinians have any confidence that the commission is protecting them?

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