Seafood industries ask ban on chemicals

Citing the potential risk to the American food supply as "too great to ignore," The National Fisheries Institute (NFI) has called for an immediate ban on "further sale, production, importation, or recycling of polychlorinated biphenyls—a family of industrial chemicals commonly known as PCBs.

PCBs are widely used in electrical and other industrial equipment because of their great stability and efficiency as heat exchangers. Efforts have been made in the last years to limit the amount of PCBs released to the environment.

In a statement issued at the National Conference on PCBs in Chicago, NFI executive director Lee J. Weddig outlined a six-part program to eliminate PCBs from the environment. In addition to the ban on further production of the product, the seafood industry association called for:

- a nationwide system for safe disposal of PCBs already in use;
- passage of the Toxic Substances Control Act to avoid future problems with other chemicals;
- retention of the FDA tolerance level for PCB presence in fish at the present 5 ppm, pending further investigation;
- compensation to commercial fishermen whose livelihood is destroyed by prohibition of the sale of species of fish in which the level of PCBs exceeds the FDA tolerance.
- Congressional investigation of the Environmental Protection Agency to determine why the EPA has not yet established effluent standards for PCB discharge despite a clear legal mandate to do so.

"The present damage to the overall fish industry is small, since relatively little commercial fishing takes place in Lake Michigan or other inland waters in which PCBs have affected certain fish," said Weddig. "But, because these chemicals are accumulative and last indefinitely, we must call an immediate and total halt to their production and urge safe disposal of those presently in use to ensure that U.S. coastal fisheries and the total seafood supply remain safe."

The presence of PCBs above the FDA guideline in certain species of fish is devastating to the individual fishermen involved because it totally destroys their livelihood. For this reason, compensation is needed for fishermen until PCB in their products falls to a safe level, the seafood association maintained.

"This is only fair," Weddig said. "The fishermen didn't dump the PCB in the water. They shouldn't have to bear the entire cost of our society's mistake."

While calling for retention of the present FDA tolerance of 5 ppm, Weddig pointed out that seafood coming into commercial markets from our oceans, coastal areas, and salmon-producing areas of the Northwest has not yet generally been affected by PCBs. "If we act now to prohibit further usage of this chemical, we will be able to continue to enjoy this important food."

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