Industry Fighting Bill

PCB Just One Of Many Water-Polluting Chemicals?

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LANSING — Polychlorinated biphenlys (PCBs) may be just the top layer in a Pandora's box of toxic pollution seeping into Michigan's waters, Director Howard Tanner of the Department of Natural Resources said.

It is coming to light that some Michigan industries use in their production process closely related chemicals, first cousins to PCBs, whose toxicity may be suspected but is yet unknown.

And because such industry wants exemptions from a proposed law banning all use of PCBs, the bill might bog down in the legislature.

An example just reported to Tanner by his staff is Lakeway Chemicals, Inc., with a plant on Big Black Creek near Muskegon. A company spokesman informed John Hesse, who is in charge of the toxicity unit, water quality control division, that it uses chlorinated biphenyls of the "amino and hydroxy groups" which means their chemical formula differs somewhat from that of PCBs. The company wants to make sure it doesn't get caught in a general ban and, according to Hesse, Muskegon area legislators want a second look at the PCB ban bill, now in a House committee.

A recent DNR biological study of Big Black Creek states "Lakeway Chemicals has a history of water pollution problems beginning around 1965 and persisting to the present." An aid to Hesse said the company's waste effluent is discharged into a pond surrounded by a dike and the dike broke during heavy rains in April and again in August, resulting in heavy pollution of the creek which flows into Mona Lake which is connected to Lake Michigan. The aid added that in any case the industrial wastes seep slowly into the creek through the earthen dike, and downstream from the plant industrial sludge is up to three feet thick.

Tanner said his first reaction to the Muskegon situation is to "take a hard stand against exceptions that might weaken the bill." However, he conceded the new situation might mean trouble and delay for the bill which his department hopes to see enacted. According to Tanner PCBs represent a long-range problem that is not confined to Michigan but is really world-wide. He said tests have shown that it can cause cancer, and that a Japanese industrial disaster affecting the health of 1,000 persons caused that nation to ban any and all use of PCBs, by law. In Michigan it is already found in such concentrations in Many Great Lakes fish that they cannot be sold commercially, and sports fishermen are advised to eat salmon and lake trout they catch only once a week. Tanner said lower Lake Michigan is "a spot" for concentrations of PCBs in fish, at or above the levels of five parts per million, which is the federal Food and Drug Administration warning point.

PCBs are chemicals industrially useful because they are good lubricants and good conductors of electricity; their use is relatively new. Tanner declares their toxicity is proven; what is not known is how prevalent they may be in the environment. Like many modern chemical compounds regarded as toxic to animal life, PCBs do not readily break down into harmless form.

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