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State close to reaching PCB ban

By JAMES V. HIGGINS
LANSING (UPI) — State lawmakers now are only a step away from approving a far-reaching ban on PCB, the toxic industrial chemical used in some form by nearly every Michigan resident and found in harmful levels in Great Lakes fish.

On a 32-0 vote with no debate Monday night, the Senate approved a bill outlawing most uses of the chemical in Michigan and returned the measure to the House, where quick action is expected on minor Senate amendments.

Legislative action on the bill brought about an unusual truce between business and environmental interests, spurred by warnings from state health and wildlife officials that a "very real" threat to human health is found in growing environmental concentrations of PCB.

The strong form of the bill approved by the Senate drew

praise from environmentalists. Some business interests, defeated in attempts to soften the bill's effects, said they could "live with" the measure.

It outlaws sale, manufacture and use of any item containing more than 100 parts per million of PCB by Jan. 1, 1978. The Department of Natural Resources could extend the ban if it were determined that even those small quantities are environmentally harmful.

Industry widely uses the flame-resistant chemical in hydraulic machinery and heat transfer fluids, and it is contained in paints, varnishes and a wide variety of consumer items.

Those uses — described as the most environmentally threatening by DNR biologists — would fall under the 1978 ban. In most cases, officials said, substitutes are available.

PCBs also are widely used in sealed electrical compo-

nents ranging in size from tiny capacitors in televisions and fluorescent lighting to tens of thousands of large capacitors each containing millions of PCB used in large-scale electrical generating equipment.

The DNR is allowed to set up a timetable for gradually phasing out such uses when substitutes become available. Attempts by utility companies to exempt all current sealed uses of PCB for the life of the component were defeated in committee.

Although costs to business in replacing PCB-containing items were listed in millions of dollars, DNR Director Howard Tanner said the presence of the chemical in virtually all Great Lakes fish tested has devastated commercial and sport fishing on the lakes, formerly a multi-million dollar business.

PCB has been linked to deaths of fish and animals that eat them. A DNR report issued last week said some Lake Superior Lake Trout contain potentially harmful levels of toxic materials, including mercury, DDT and PCB.

Following the report, state health director Maurice Reizen advised Lake Superior shoreline residents against using lake trout as a major diet source.

DNR biologist John Hesse said that, if all Great Lakes states ban use of PCB, currently harmful levels would begin to subside within five years. So far, Indiana has approved such a ban.