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Pike Attacks PCB Standards

By Bob Wacker

Rep. Otis G. Pike (D-Riverhead) has entered the controversy over PCB chemical contamination of fish by telling the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that there is a lot of difference between two parts per million and 2,000 parts.

In a letter to Sherwin Gardiner, acting FDA commissioner, made public yesterday by Pike's office, the congressman challenges the proposed new regulation lowering the acceptable PCB level from five parts per million to two. He observed that the PCB alarm began when residents of the town of Yusho, Japan, suffered birth defects, skin disorders and other physical ills traced in part to PCB contamination. But in that incident, he said, "individuals consumed rice oil contaminated at levels of 2,000 to 3,000 parts per million . . . .

"The particular rice oil involved in the Japanese poisoning episode had other toxic impurities," Pike went on, " so as the report indicates, 'it is likely that amounts of pure PCBs greater than those reported in this episode would be required to produce the reported toxic effects.'"

FDA officials said that Pike's letter, dated May 27, had not yet arrived at Gardiner's office, in Rockville, Md. "It often takes three days for mail to get from Washington out here, and we had a Memorial Day weekend," Robert Wetherill, an FDA congressional liaison officer said.

Pike, who could not be reached for comment, has also joined commercial fishermen and Suffolk County officials in challenging the FDA economic impact estimate that dropping the tolerance level would cost the nation's entire fishing industry $7 million annually; he claims that the potential loss to the striped bass and bluefish industries in Suffolk County alone would be $636,624.

Anthony Taormina, state director of marine and coastal resources for the DEC, said that about 450 Long Island commercial fishermen would be affected by the lower limit.

Another FDA spokesman said that the PCB ban would be enforced by sampling fish destined for interstate commerce in warehouses--and only those with contamination above the two-parts-per-million limit would be condemned. Studies of fish caught around Long Island by the State Department of Environmental Conservation have shown mean levels of 3.89 PCB parts per million in striped bass and 2.57 in bluefish.

Tuesday was the deadline for the FDA to receive written comment from interested parties on the proposed change. A decision will be announced, the FDA spokesman said, after all the comments have been studied. That, however, might be several weeks from now, as the FDA's mailroom is swamped with written comments on the saccharine controversy. "We're falling further behind in opening our mail every day," a mail clerk said.

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