Fish group speaks up — Nov 14, 76 B'ham P-H.

Cancer chemicals invade from Georgia?

BY KATE HARRIS
News staff writer

MONTGOMERY — Because a Georgia industry is dumping what is reported to be cancer-causing organic compounds into the Coosa River and those compounds are being found in fish, then the river in Alabama should be closed to commercial fishing as far south as below Weiss Lake, according to a spokesman for the world's largest fishing organization.

"The state should also put up appropriate signs to the public informing them that they can catch fish and release them but they should not be eaten," said Bob Barker, federation director for the Bass Anglers Sportsmen Society (BASS), which is headquartered in Montgomery. "The fun of the sport could still be enjoyed."

Barker said BASS is looking into the possibility of filing a suit against the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) "because we feel it's not doing the job it's supposed to do — step in when the states drag their feet on environmental matters."

The General Electric plant in Rome, Ga., is blamed with being the source of the organic compounds — known as PCBs — in the Coosa.

PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) is used in manufacturing capacitors and similar electrical equipment because of its inertness and heat resistant and insulating properties. It is similar to DDT and is reported to be cancer causing if eaten in sufficient quantities.

"PCBs from the manufacturing process settle in the sedimentation of streams and are picked up in vegetation eaten by small fish, in whose bodies the PCBs concentrate. The small fish are consumed by larger ones and the higher the progress up the food chain, the greater the concentration become," said Barker.

DR. IRA MYERS, state health officer and chairman of the Alabama Water Improvement Commission (AWIC) warned the public Nov. 5 that fish samples taken from Weiss had PCB levels "considerably in excess" of the five parts per million limit set by the federal Food and Drug Administration.

But he stopped short of declaring the fish hazardous to health, and State Conservation Department Officials said they will not close the lake to commercial fishing or post warning signs without an official "hazardous to health" declaration from Myers.

BASS is the second voice to speak out

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Fishermen warn about chemicals

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publicity against the position of AWIC and Myers. The other is Henry Caddell, chief of environmental affairs for the office of Atty. Gen. Bill Baxley.

Barber said Weiss Lake "should have been closed to fishing in August after the first samples were taken, since the tests then showed that five of the commercial samples exceeded five parts per million.

"What kind of percentages do they have to have to consider PCBs a health hazard?" asked Barber. "Later samplings showed even higher concentrations in both commercial and game fish, so why the wait?"

Myers said he is approaching the matter "with caution since data available to date is limited and it's somewhat difficult to assess the overall impact" of the tests.

"PCBs," said Barber, "is not only a state but a national problem."

He said the largest cash settlement of a pollution case to date was made in September between the General Electric Co. and New York State in the state's enforcement proceedings against the company for polluting the Hudson River with PCBs.

UNDER THE terms of the agreement General Electric will pay $3 million directly to New York State and will set aside another million for studying the toxicity of PCBs and for experimentation with different clean up techniques.

GE has also agreed to cease using PCBs by July 1, 1977, and to reduce gradually its disposal of the chemical substances into the Hudson by installing sophisticated waste treatment equipment.

"The suit that resulted in the settlement was brought against New York State by the Natural Resources Defense, Inc., Washington, D. C., in conjunction with two environmental groups," said Barber.

"Sometimes it takes a nudge from concerned citizens to get these matters corrected," he added. "Free flowing water belongs to all and if polluted water comes into Alabama and Weiss, it affects the people of many states who come here to fish."

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