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PCBs in Still River trailed to city dump

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Evidence is mounting that Danbury's landfill is polluting the Still River with PCBs, the "miracle" chemical whose use has been drastically curtailed due to its deadly effect on humans and fish.

Test results released this week by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) show river sediment below the dump to contain 1,300 parts per billion of polychlorinated biphenyls — the highest recorded in Connecticut.

Fish samples taken on the Housatonic River and Lake Lillinonah are expected to indicate how badly contaminated these areas are. Test results should be available by the end of the month.

No safety standards exist for PCB in sediment, but fish containing more than five parts per million are considered poisonous.

Researchers don't yet know the relationship between PCB levels in sediment, where the chemical accumulates, and fish, who ingest the substance.

The USGS results support claims by the Housatonic Valley Association, a Kent-based conservation group whose tests indicated the city dump was leaching (leaking) PCB into the river.

Connecticut's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) rejected HVA's results and is questioning the USGS findings.

Sportsmen and conservationists have been pressing the state to determine whether Connecticut waterways, some regional and national lures to fisherman, are contaminated with PCB.

A colorless, ordorless fluid, PCB was until recently best known as a transformer and capacitor insulator. The compound was widely used until 1971 in epoxy glue, ink, plastics, hydraulic fluid and carbonless copy paper.

Large quantities of PCB were routinely dumped from General Electric plants on the Hudson and Housatonic rivers until medical researchers linked it with cancer, birth defects, skin lesions and sterility. PCB products are also present in most landfills.

Danbury has been under state orders to clean up or shut down its landfill for three years. Joseph Boren of DEP said materials have polluted groundwater, and that water flows into the Still River.

Boren would not say whether he believes the landfill has reached PCB because "I haven't seen the test results." Charles Fredette of DEP, who had the test results, said he didn't know Danbury's landfill was found to be contaminating the river.

"We've known for a long time the dump is a source of PCB," Fredette said. "We don't know how much, but we haven't found any other source."

Although USGS has tested the Still River for three years without challenge, Fredette said DEP is challenging the 1,300 count. "It might

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Still River gets PCB from dump

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have just been a pocket of PCB," he explained.

USGS hydrologist David Grason said he pooled samples from several points to assure accuracy. His tests at Newtown Road showed no PCB.

Grason's department tests about 50 different locations in Connecticut for water quality. One is Route 133 on the Still River in Brookfield. Readings there were 67 in 1974 and 87 last year. This year's results will be announced within three weeks, he said.

PCB isn't water-soluble, so it doesn't flow with water current. It tends to drop into sediment to remain unless the earth is upheaved or bottom-feeding fish consume it and move upstream.

This is what happened with striped bass in the Hudson River, which New York authorities last year declared unfit for human consumption.

New York state sued General Electric for its role in the contamination and the parties recently made a multi-million dollar settlement.

The company now discharges only minute quantities of PCB into the Hudson and Housatonic (at Pittsfield, Mass.) The lone PCB manufacturer, Monsanto Corp., will stop producing the chemical next year.

That still leaves the question of cleanup, however.

No one knows how extensive Connecticut's problem is, so DEP, the state health department and USGS are coordinating their individually scanty PCB testing programs.

Lake Lillinonah is suspected of harboring large amounts of PCB because it's the rather immobile link between the Still and Housatonic rivers. Both rivers have bottom-feeding fish.

Last August, DEP announced an extensive testing program from the lake. The department wanted to examine the relationship of sediment and fish flesh levels of PCB.

As yet, no samples have been taken. Fredette said, "We had to decide if it was within the realm of our budget to go ahead. We were also concerned that the lake bottom might have been stirred up by the Housatonic power dams."

This week, DEP decided to go ahead. Fredette said samples should be collected by the year's end, "but I can't say for sure because everything depends on what else we have to do."

The health department has already taken fish — perhaps only one — from the lake, in conjunction with its program on the Housatonic and Farmington rivers. Results are expected within a month.

David Wiggin of the health department said only one or two fish can be taken from each sampling spot "because our labs can't accommodate more. More would certainly be better, but we can't do more. This will indicate what we should be watching, though."

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