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River-dredgings and PCBs

"We find PCBs everywhere we look," says Glenn Schweitzer, director of the Environmental Protection Agency's office of toxic substances. One place that bears looking at closely, it seems, is the muck on the bottom of the Mississippi River. According to a recent report of a federal-state interagency task force, there is a good chance that a toxic substance found this year in fish taken from the river came from river-bottom sediment stirred up by dredging. The substance is PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), which are not biodegradable.

PCBs — a chemical family derived from benzene — are widely used as fire-retardative insulating fluids in electrical transformers and capacitors. What makes PCBs fire-retardants is their chlorine content. But, according to Business Week, it is also the chlorine that causes the pollution problem — a problem many scientists now believe is more serious than the problems caused by DDT. Monsanto Co., this country's only PCB producer, has voluntarily stopped selling PCBs for non-essential uses — carbonless paper, paints, coatings and the like. But PCBs are still getting into the country's rivers and streams, either because of inadequate state and federal regulation or because of accidental spills.

The Environmental Protection Agency failed in 1973 to set stringent standards for PCB use. It is now planning to reintroduce proposed regulations that would severly limit discharges into rivers and streams. Those regulations and other aspects of the PCB problem will get an airing this week in a special national symposium EPA and several other federal agencies are sponsoring in Chicago for industry, conservation groups, the scientific community and local and state governments. If nothing else, the symposium is expected to call attention to how serious and how widespread PCB pollution has become.

Tracking down the source of the PCB pollution in the Mississippi is not easy, as the interagency task force is finding. All the more reason for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to insist that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers comply with its dredging regulations. If dredging is stirring up PCBs, as the task force suggests, the corps—the major dredger in the state — needs to be more careful about it operations. A federal court has ordered the corps to comply. The corps' local office in St. Paul is willing, but corps headquarters in Washington is balking.

The MPCA wants the corps to provide in writing, and in advance of dredging, detailed information about its activities, including "prior sampling and analysis of material to be dredged," dredging methods and disposal sites for dredge spoils. With the PCB threat added to other problems the state is encountering from the corps' dredging, the MPCA's request is reasonable.

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